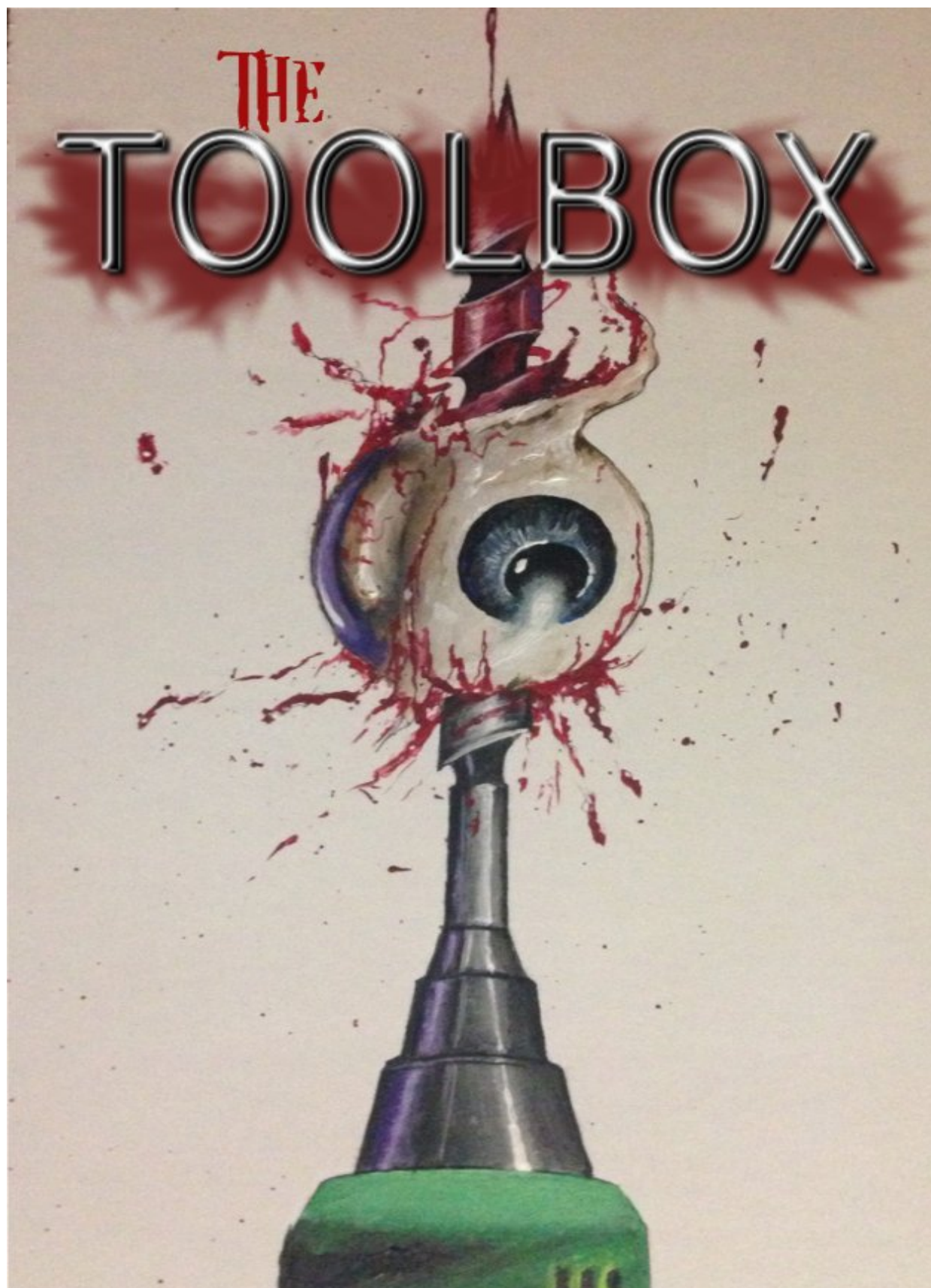


THE TOOLBOX



THE TOOLBOX



THE TOOLBOX

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First Edition

Horrificed Press

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FOREWORD

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Table of Contents

Tools

Neil Leckman

Tools of the Trade

John L. Thompson

Al's Hammer

John H. Dromey

Dead Secrets

Matthew Wilson

Bad Date

Neil Leckman

Dog Days

John L. Thompson

Against Whom All Other Women Shall Be Measured

Ken Goldman

Vice Grips the Rowing Crew
Dave Fragments

Chasing the Storm
Ron Koppelberger

Duct And Cover
Ken L. Jones

The Infection
Matthew Wilson

Sated Attire
Ron Koppelberger

Get Up and Go
Kevin L. Jones

Bad Blood
Matthew Wilson

[Four Ways to Say I Love You](#)
Ken Goldman

[A Shovel In Hell](#)
John Kujawski

The Chainsaw
David Frazier

Mother's Sewing Lessons
J.R. Roper

The Brands
Thomas M. Malafarina

The Draper Ear Defender

Shane Ward

Silent Angel
Matthew Wilson

It's a Gift
John H. Dromey

Long Hard Kiss Goodnight
John L. Thompson

Tools Of The Trade
Thomas M. Malafarina

They Called Me The Jigsaw Man
Julie R. Kendrick

Forest Dreams
Ron Koppelberger

A Room Full of Eyes
Robert Evangelista

The Spirit Level
Mathias Jansson

The Measure of a Madman
Tim Tobin

The Executioner's Ax
David Frazier

Mister White
G. K. Murphy

The Whole (Tool) Kit and Caboodle
John H. Dromey

Catching A Break
Robert Evangelista

Twist Drill
Stuart Holland

Cut Throat
John L. Thompson

Returning the Tools...
Neil Leckman

Meet The Authors

TOOLS

Neil Leckman

Tools

I keep them all safe behind my locks
Special things nested inside my toolbox
Choose a tool and then listen well
For each one has a tale to tell
Choose the right one from its place
To gouge an eye or smash a face
Will they die fast, or slowly bleed
Choose carefully the tool you need
Return the tools when you are through
And your tale will be in here too.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

John L. Thompson

Utility Knife

It's been a long day, one of those days where everything drags on. I opened the front door, stepped in and immediately felt a wave of hot stale air that's been cooking all day without the air conditioning being on. The first thing I had to deal with this morning when I arrived at work at the truck stop was fix some asshole truck driver's brake system because they had locked up. All he did was whine the whole time afterwards about the bill. Then I had to deal with a lecture sessions from my boss about showing up late too many times. I've been staying up late at night and he knows and understands why but he needs to rag on me so the other employees won't do the same. Then it was back to fixing and arguing with truck drivers about the repair bills. Like everyone these days, money is a hard thing to come by but mechanics have got to live too and I fight for every penny. Ever since the economy tanked it's the same story all over.

The refrigerator beckons for me to suck down a cold one and I oblige by popping the top off a cold can of Milwaukee's Best and drink deep of the bubbling amber fluid. The air around the house is stifling. In the old days, my wife would've had the swamp cooler turned on and the air would've been nice and cold by the time I got home. These days, though, without her around, I could care less about it. The house is a mess. I haven't dusted anything, unwashed dishes piled up high by the kitchen sink with rotting leftovers and a heap of clothes in the laundry room need attention. I could really care less though.

Not any more.

The funny thing is that I was doing good as a mechanic up until the economy took a shit and money quickly dried up. Thank God though all my tools were paid for. I knew a few guys who had their tools and toolboxes repo'd by the tool guy because they weren't making enough on flat rate. All in all though, being a mechanic is a trade that's always in demand but gone are those days of a good solid cash flow from turning wrenches and busting knuckles and watching the green backs pile up. Now most people just run

their cars into the ground before pouring a cent into them and fight over the repair bills.

My wife... I almost forgot about her.

I have a lot to say about her and people have had nothing but good things to speak of when they talk about her. We were childhood sweethearts, met in the eighth grade and married right out of high school before I joined the Army and did my gig for Uncle Sam as a combat medic. After serving a couple of tours in Iraq, I got out and decided that being in the medical field just wasn't for me. Don't get me wrong, though, being a doctor or nurse in a combat zone is an honorable profession and I have nothing but an immense respect for those guys that see a need to help their fellow man by wallowing in the shit and blood to save a life. It just was not for me and I took to fixing equipment in place of repairing guys with jagged bullet holes or shrapnel blast injuries from IED's. I came out of the service and went to Tech school to learn how to work on the big diesel equipment and wound up working at a truck stop on the West end of town. My wife and I had big plans and life had dealt us a good hand. I loved her to death.

Funny how things change at the blink of an eye.

I grabbed another cold one and walked outside to the garage, opened the door and stepped in. It's a good set up in here. It's got an air compressor, a torch set, welders and the two large Snap-On tool boxes off against the wall near the '69 Chevy Nova I'd been working on. A thing about the Nova. I've had the car since I was fourteen years old and I'm nearing forty. Not too bad when a guy can claim that. You always hear guys lamenting about their first car and how they had to sell it because they got married or they lost it in a divorce or something. I paid \$600 bucks for the car. I had to work my ass off at a hole in the wall diner scrubbing dishes to pay for it. It's been with me through high school, served Melinda without a hitch during my deployment to Iraq and all through Tech school. There it served as a commuter to and from school as I learned how to wrench on heavy Diesel equipment. I remember how it mostly survived the faithful years it had served Melinda and me and finally not to mention surviving the brutal Montana winters. It deserved to have a rest and be restored to its former glory. When I finally managed to get the bills paid and situated, I went and bought Melinda a new Dodge Durango, not the basic model either but the fully loaded model with the 5.7 Hemi. Paid cash for that... when the money was good.

I looked over the Nova while sipping my beer and pondered what to do next. I see a spot of rust bleeding through the primer finish on the body and scratch at it. I want to restore the old car. It deserves it. I have so many memories with it. I got a pile of new parts like the interior, engine overhaul kit and rubber door and trunk lid seals all piled up on a nearby shelving unit. Perhaps I should start working and less thinking.

I open one drawer of the nearby toolbox and look inside at the perfectly polished and arranged tools. Being a mechanic is like being a soldier in the service of one's country. Take care of the tools of the trade and they will take care of you. I spent an easy seventy-five thousand bucks on the tools and equipment here in this garage. The toolbox at work has about thirty-five invested but all together I made my money in return

Now where was I?

A muffled moan floats up from the floor and suddenly I remember.

My wife bade me farewell some two years ago. It was fall and the leaves from the trees had turned a bright yellow and orange and begun tumbling to the ground. I remember she waved, winked and blew a kiss before firing off the Durango and on down the road she went. She worked at a dental office as an assistant taking x-rays of rotten teeth and gum lines for the dentist to study and plan out a route of attack on the patients.

Jeffery Irons was off work. More like a politician shit bag who drank his suppers until early morning, finding whores who plied their trade in the dark, dank alleyways off the downtown area and then... well the story's probably obvious. You might remember reading about the big pile up on interstate 10 just up near Gore Hill. A drunk driver slammed into a bright red Durango and killed a thirty-year woman. She didn't die right away but laid in that God forsaken ditch for an hour before help came. A drunken Irons wandered around after the accident complaining of a strained arm and cursing the dying woman about getting in his way. After all, did she not realize he was a state legislator? Did she not see the State owned license plate? How dare she get in his way!

This is what happens with most drunk driving accidents. The drunk driver usually survives because he or she is too intoxicated and relaxed to feel anything. Essentially they bounce around like a rubber ball. The other people they hit, though, see the impact coming and brace up, their muscles go rigid which creates a situation for more injuries.

To make a long story short, Irons claimed he drank some that night to alleviate a migraine, which was why he drank anyway and managed to get the case against him thrown out because the arresting officer failed to read him his Miranda Rights. He was still serving as a State legislator and had hopes of running for Congress. He had managed to murder and get away with it due to some of his political ties. His attorney had also argued that Melinda had swerved into him and it was her fault. Anyway, with all of the bungled efforts by the police, Irons walked out of the courtroom a vindicated man amid vigorous handshakes from his political butt-buddies. I was left an empty vessel, wondering just what had happened. Irons still planned on running for Congress. I can honestly say that at least Ronald Reagan had balls of steel and was the last great politician next to Truman. Just about every politician since is on some big corporation's payroll to lobby for them and loves screwing the workingman... I digress. Let's get back to the point.

Things happen for a reason. I can tell you that. I never forget and neither do most working folks and personally not too many people give a rat's ass what happens to a politician. For some reason they feel they are to be treated like royalty and act like it but it's all bullshit. It's idiots like Irons who would be more than happy to throw the poor people of this country in the middle of a war just to make a buck. In this case, he murdered Melinda and the next day ads were flowing over the television set about how patriotic he was and how he fought for the middle class and all the bullshit trimmings. It's the same old damned story.

Anyway, he lost the election but planned on running in a couple of years. I began to bid my time and be patient.

Jeffery Irons was out running around one night and simply disappeared. Some say he couldn't handle what he'd done to that woman on I-10 those long two years ago. Others claimed he ran off to Canada to 'find himself'. The cops came around and asked questions if I knew of his whereabouts. Of course I did not and acted in horror that they would even insinuate such a thing and invited them to come inside and look around. Feel free to come back with a search warrant and look if they felt it would help. The one detective looked over my shoulder and was thinking about it before he gave a smile and said that wouldn't be necessary. I haven't heard from them for a couple of weeks now.

I picked up the air hammer and admired the well-worn aluminum frame and the quick change bit head. I've pounded out races, bearing and u-joints by the dozen with this thing but I also know it's not the right tool for the job. I put it back into its place in the drawer and pick up the air shears. I've cut out whole damaged trailer sidings and installed whole new fresh sheets with this but believe this tool's not going to work for what I have in mind. I rummage through the other drawers examining screwdrivers, hammers, pin punches, hacksaws, sockets neatly displayed in their holders, ratchets until I finally see one tool that's made many things better.

An orange colored utility knife that's been used so well these past couple of weeks.

I pick it up out of the drawer, slide the release button forward, examining the long thin razor blade and find a small rust spot on it... or is it blood? No matter, I can change the blade.

I remember when Melinda went hunting with me and I nailed a twelve-point buck out at four hundred yards with a .300 Magnum rifle. The skinning part is what interested me the most. If you get yourself a deer or elk, it's funny how the skin peels right off with little effort with the help of a skinning blade. I still have the tanned and treated hide lying around here somewhere.

The moans from below grow louder.

Back when we bought this house, the old couple that owned it had a special feature custom built into the garage floor back in the fifties at the height of the so-called nuclear terror age. Everyone back then felt a nuclear holocaust with Russia was inevitable. It was a bomb shelter and it didn't even come up on any of the city's architectural maps and layouts on what the house had. Basically, it's not an uncommon thing to see around here in these parts. Most people had them built or built them themselves. The old man was a construction worker and spent countless months and years fabricating this bomb shelter before sealing it off in the 80's due to lack of interest or finally accepting the fact a nuclear holocaust just was not going to happen. He died of a heart attack and his wife went to a nursing home suffering from dementia so no one knew about it.

I bought the house and began setting up the garage to rebuild the old Nova. Then I found the secret floor panel off in the corner. You had to look real hard to see it but it was there and when I opened it with some effort,

everything below was covered in a thick film of dust. I cleaned it all up and used it for storage but these days, it serves in a different capacity.

I opened the trap door and looked down.

Jeffery looked up and his eyes went wide with terror. He's strapped to the top of a bench with a series of leather straps that hold his legs, torso and arms solid in place. The bench top is stained with piss, shit and vomit all mixed in with crusted blood. My medic training has come to be useful these days. I keep him alive by the use of IV drips of saline solutions and other medications to help fight off infections. I don't want him dying too quickly. He shakes his head, pleading with me and tears begin to well up in his eyes. It's a normal reaction. He knows the fun is about to begin for some hours ahead. Sometimes I like to just sit there on the bar stool across from him and watch him as he wonders what I'm going to do to him but don't end up doing anything at all. Then other nights, I got plans and put them to work. His whole body is covered in saran wrap and under the rippling plastic skin he's a mass of cracked scabs and dried blood and pus. It took some effort to do this with just the utility knife but I got it done. I have cut most of his hide-away already, with the exception of his face and scalp. I've also got rid of the evidence by feeding the neighbors' two massive Rottweiler dogs. They've come to appreciate the late night scraps of skin.

It's time to take that last trophy and claim it for Melinda. For the past several nights, I haven't done a thing. The whole mind game thing is the worst kind of torture. The whole purpose is to murder him slowly, strip him of his dignity and fuck with his mind before killing him.

I watched him intently as I walked down the stairs. He was scared shitless. I had trailed him for some nights until the moment was right to strike. I had plans just to just to walk up and blow his head off with a .45 but that would've been too simple. A long drawn out affair would be better. I found him passed out behind the wheel at a rest area overlooking the Missouri River, struck him on the temple and stuffed him in the trunk of my car. His truck wound up in the Missouri River after tossing a heavy rock on the pedal and throwing it in gear. It sailed off the high banks Dukes of Hazzard style, splashed deep into the dark swirling waters and sank quickly.

Like a squirrel packing away food for the winter, I secreted him home and down into the bomb shelter and have kept him there all this time.

I hold the utility knife close to his eye so he can see the light reflect off its thin sharp blade. It's the tool he knows so well. He braces up,

knowing the familiar agony to come. I think I will skin his face off. I will start at the top, sliding the blade along the skin just under the layer and then work the sides. From there, it's easy. Just peel the corner and tug, cutting away the fatty tissue that holds it away as you pull. I expect him to have a lot of blood loss and prepare beforehand. A roll of saran wrap lies nearby, morphine drip tubes are ready when I finally finish peeling the wet flap off his skull. I take another sip of the can of beer before sitting it aside and donning a pair of rubber surgical gloves.

I enjoy these quiet lulls before the storm.

I lean over and smile. He knows there is pain waiting for him ahead. "Jeff," I whisper. "I know it's been some long nights but tonight will be the longest." He shakes his head, eyes wide and is breathing hard, sweating, pleading and moaning.

I smile and pat him on the cheek before making the first incision. When I get done with Irons, I'm going for his attorney. I got bigger plans for that son of a bitch. I doubt anyone will be crying over a missing politician and a lawyer.

Yes, a long night indeed and my boss will be upset again about me being late in the morning.

AL'S HAMMER

John H. Dromey

Hammer

Al's favorite hammer was missing. Misplaced for sure; maybe even lost. One thing was certain: the clawed carpentry tool was not in the place where he usually kept it. He'd looked there a dozen times already. It didn't even occur to him to go to a hardware store and buy a new one. Rather, his mind harked back to simpler times when neighbors helped each other out.

The sun set. It was time for action. Al couldn't wait any longer. He went next door and entered an unlocked garage with the intention of borrowing his neighbor Bob's hammer. There were two. Al hefted each in turn and took a practice swing. The modern steel-necked tool with plastic grips felt alien to his bare-handed touch. He chose the hammer with a wooden handle worn smooth by many hours of contact with soft leather gloves.

When Al walked out of the garage, there was a spring in his step. He was a man with a purpose. A man obsessed.

His intention was to right a wrong. Many years earlier he'd been jilted by a raven-haired cheerleader. It seemed like only yesterday to Al. That rejection still rankled. He'd once exorcised his rage by beating the stuffing out of Miranda's favorite teddy bear. He could do it again.

As soon as he saw Miranda walking towards him on the dimly-lit sidewalk, Al began to have second thoughts. Why should an innocent stuffed animal be demolished when the avenger could go directly to the source of his humiliation? This time he'd get it right.

Al squinted at the approaching figure. There was something different about her. She'd changed in some dramatic way. Her hair was lighter, or she was taller than he remembered. Where were his glasses? He used his free hand to pat his pockets. No luck. Al didn't know where his spectacles were. Probably with his missing hammer. That sort of uncertainty came with the territory for the absentminded. Nothing to be concerned about, though. He needed to concentrate his full attention on the job at hand. Al tightened his hold on the hammer he'd surreptitiously removed from Bob's garage.

As the woman came closer, Al forgot all about his earlier misgivings. The passing years had eroded his inhibitions until only a paper-thin veneer of civility remained intact.

His temper fed by long-suppressed teenage angst, Al swung the hammer with a youthful enthusiasm that belied his gray hairs.

He took animal delight in the activity. He reveled in the sounds. From the initial crunch as the hammer first impacted Miranda's skull through the subsequent diminution of bone-related noises and the ascendance of swishing whispers alternating with faint sucking sounds as the face of the hammer passed in and out of the pulpy mass that remained. Al luxuriated in the moistness of the work. He equated the splatter striking his face with the spray from a warm, tropical sea. He was transported to a world apart. A considerable amount of time went by before he came back down to earth.

Al beheld his handiwork. His blank expression gave no indication of what he might be thinking. He loosened his grip on the hammer. The handle slid slowly through his fingers and dropped to the sidewalk next to the body. Al turned on his heel and began to walk away from the scene of the crime. Whether he was making a concerted effort to hide his tracks, or more than likely was simply tired, Al scuffed the soles of his shoes with every step.

The killer wandered aimlessly for a while. He went up onto porch after porch and tried to get in, without success. He was unfazed by failure; he kept trying time and time again. At first, he was thwarted at every turn by one unyielding doorknob after another.

Finally, his luck changed. Al went into the first house he found with an unlocked front door. He was home. He pressed the door backwards by leaning on it with his shoulder blades until he heard a click. Then he took off his shoes and left them on the throw rug. Al walked barefoot to the bathroom.

Old habits die hard. As soon as he got back to familiar surroundings, Al behaved like a good little boy. He took off his soiled clothes and placed them in a laundry hamper. His wife could do the wash, or his mother. He didn't care which. From time to time, he had an inkling that one or the other of them was no longer among the living, but he didn't have the presence of mind to realize that both had passed on. His grasp on reality was tenuous at best.

Al scrubbed himself until he was squeaky clean; even washing carefully behind his ears so no potatoes could grow there. He didn't want to be embarrassed in public by having a doting female spit on her handkerchief and rub off a spot of dirt he'd missed.

Having completed his ritual ablutions, Al put on his pajamas, crawled into bed, and slept like a baby.

The sun rose. It was a new day. Al resumed his usual routine as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. At noon, he consumed the prepared meal brought to him by a home-delivery service. He ate quickly, not even bothering to transfer the food from the Styrofoam container to a clean plate. That way he didn't have to do any dishes.

Afterwards, Al went into the living room and stretched out in his recliner. He fell asleep while listening to a conservative talk show on the radio. His dreams were reruns.

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The police were baffled by the commission of an especially-vicious crime in a usually quiet neighborhood. Robbery had not been the motive. The victim's purse contained credit cards, cash and a pair of expensive earrings. She'd apparently been the random victim of a senseless assault. The clues didn't make much sense, either. On the one hand, there was such an abundance of forensic evidence that the crime techs had to work overtime to collect it all. That fact alone seemed to indicate a careless killer who could be easily caught. On the other hand, there were some early indications that the murder might have been the work of a diabolically clever master criminal. The clues didn't lead anywhere.

The handle of the murder weapon provided no usable fingerprints.

The crime lab shifted into high gear, but no one there could identify the brand of footgear that had generated the smudged tread marks on the sidewalk near the body and on the nearby porches. The best guess was the killer had worn an ancient pair of basketball shoes.

The next step in the investigation was for the detectives to canvass the neighborhood.

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Al's doorbell rang. Before opening the door, he folded the throw rug over the shoes he'd worn the night before and put them in the hall closet. He noticed there were some dark spots on the uppers, but the shoes were old and therefore such staining was to be expected.

In contrast, Al was genuinely surprised to learn there'd been a drop of blood found on the handle to his front door. He was equally dismayed by the sight of faint traces of bloody shoeprints on his front porch.

"Who's going to clean that up?" he asked one of the detectives. He received no answer. Just for that, he didn't invite them inside. They stood on the porch to talk.

As for aiding with the investigation, Al was just as confused as his neighbors.

"Have you seen any strange vehicles on your street or observed any suspicious behavior?" the lead detective asked.

"No," Al said. He was unable to provide the police with any useful information.

The detectives looked at the image of the interior doorknob reflected by a hallway mirror. They also observed the bare, hardwood floor on the other side of the threshold. There was no obvious sign of blood in either place. The detectives had no probable cause to search Al's house. They moved on down the block.

~~~

A couple of nights later Al was restless. Something was nagging at the back of his mind. He went in search of his hammer. It was still missing. He went out the back door, cut across the alley and started looking for an unlocked garage.

With his neighbor Leroy's hammer in hand, Al went looking for trouble. He found it, or rather a dead-ringer for Miranda did. She died of blunt force trauma. As soon as her body stopped twitching, Al lost interest in the murder weapon. He dropped it beside her body. Al wasn't concerned in the least about someone in law enforcement finding the instrument of death. That was the farthest thing from his mind. He just wanted to go home and get cleaned up. That was what he did. He made remarkably few wrong turns and went in through his own backdoor unobserved.



Al took Virgil's hammer with him on his next nighttime excursion. Miranda had dyed her hair. Al thought about commenting on the amount of weight she'd gained, but thought that would be insulting and might affect her self-esteem. He bludgeoned her to death instead.

Later, Al turned on the TV. The local evening news was depressing, but ultimately irrelevant. What did Al care about a serial killer on the loose? Since all of the victims so far had been females, he was surely not at any great risk.

On a subsequent night Al stole a stranger's hammer and went out on the prowl again. "First-time killer; longtime fan," he told Miranda, referring to his schoolboy crush, as he administered the fatal blows. Following an adrenal rush, he slipped into a mental limbo.

Dittos for the night after that.

A couple of evenings later, Al was out and about again. At some point he wondered what he was doing; he was strolling down a lonely street, after dark, armed with a hammer. Then he remembered. He was looking for somebody. A certain someone who'd slighted him in grammar school.

Not only that, it seemed like he'd used his hammer to batter someone else recently. Miranda, wasn't it?

Well, there she was again. He stopped swinging his arms, so the hammer would be nearly invisible when held next to the leg of his dark trousers. He let his shoulders slump and shuffled along at a snail's pace allowing her to get closer before he struck.

In a lucid moment, Al realized that only about 48 hours had gone by since he had last killed Miranda. He stopped swinging long enough to ask his latest victim, "How many times do I have to kill you before you stay dead?"

His timing was off. She was past talking.

Al found his way back home eventually. He'd gotten away with murder again.

He had no sense of accomplishment. His thirst for revenge was unquenched.

He pattered around the house during most of the next day. After sunset, Al put on clean underwear—just in case of an accident—and then laced up his basketball shoes. He went looking for a hammer.

He found one.

A short time later Al was walking down the public sidewalk, looking for Miranda. He drew some strange looks himself.

The fact Al was wearing nothing but white underwear and vintage athletic shoes was strange enough, but the fact he was also carrying a hammer caused other pedestrians to give him a wide berth while at the same time reaching for their cell phones to dial 9-1-1.

Al was taken into custody. He didn't resist. Inside his house, the police discovered a hamper full of bloody clothes. His bedroom closet was bare and even his underwear drawer was almost empty.

While awaiting arraignment, Al overheard a couple of the detectives talking about him.

“Why'd it take us so long to catch a senile killer?”

“Everybody thought he was harmless. That's how he managed to get close to his victims. Even the profilers had it wrong.”

“Do you think he's in his second childhood?”

“No, he's well beyond that. He's in his second adolescence.”

## DEAD SECRETS

*Matthew Wilson*

*Allen Key*

Ray knew a diary was where a girl would keep her secrets; the words that lined her heart would fill its perfumed pages. He'd thought her only teasing when she had called his brother's name during their love making.

It was April Fool's Day and she'd not quite forgiven him for putting her face on that lonely, single and ugly web page. Time pressed on and many questions grew from one seed of doubt. Her kisses cooled and seemed to have little and less time for him now more than ever.

She did not talk during love making now as she only spoke of headaches. Not tonight, more an undertone of 'never more'. The diary would know, her truest friend unknowingly betray her. What she would tell no other.

He watched her sleep a while, recognising the pattern of her breathing to know she was truly in the next world before, close to midnight, he snuck out of bed and down to the garage where he kept his tools. Each was branded with his initials.

For a moment, with no true grasp of why, he looked at the Phillips head screwdriver. The right twist, he thought, would have no problems taking an eye out.

No, he had no proof.

All he needed was the diary.

And for that hardback leather friend to open his mouth he needed - ah, perfect. Of course Jackie would not tell him the contents, let alone she had one. He'd come across the heart shaped account of her woes quite by chance when looking for a secret pack of smokes he was sure she'd hidden in the name of health when really he felt she disliked the stench of the things sticking to her sofa cushions.

The anxiety of her joke got too much.

He needed a smoke.

But in the drawer he only found the keeper of her secrets. Now he had to get to its core, he needed his own friend. Mr. Allen Key. He spent an hour

sharpening one end, rubbing rude words into the driveway, what his own heart beat.

Betrayed.

No, it was not certain. Was not anything, even when he looked at the hacksaw and marvelled how easily he could remove a limb with it.

He took a breath and inserted the mutilated end of the Allen key into the diamond shaped lock, twisted.

Click.

Ray had always liked the neat script of her handwriting, so soft and feminine. It betrayed a real woman, home maker. Mother. Not one who would cheat and scheme. His eyes ached with sleep, but the building hate rekindled his core and filled his mind with poison.

June twenty eighth was the clincher. The day he'd gone drinking with his friends and his poor dear brother had stayed home with the 'flu. That night Jackie wrote of wandering hands welcomed across her flesh. She told her diary she felt guilt, she knew it was wrong.

But it didn't make it right.

Ray sighed as he closed the book. It was no Wuthering Heights, but it had taken his breath all the same. He looked at the end of the Allen key, wondered how deep into a sleeping brain it would go if pushed with the right amount of fury behind it.

Everyone needed friends to take away the hurt. Jackie had her secrets and his little buddy here had exposed them all wide open. He lay down the book and rubbed the grease marks off his rump from where he'd sat. The night was young and later he'd need his spade for the garden.

But now he had the Allen key. His friend.

And, like lies, sometimes that was all you needed.

## BAD DATE

*Neil Leckman*

### *The Awl*

I'd had my share of disastrous dates, but this last one pretty much topped them all. Why I ever thought I could date one of my sister's friends and it would work out is beyond me. I'd have had better luck trimming the toenails off a family of badgers.

I thought the date had gone well until I took Beatrice home and tried to kiss her goodnight.

"Whoa there, killer, stifle your jets. I went out with you as favor for your sister, but that's as far as I go. You're too much of a tool for me. No backbone and, from what your sister says about you all the time, you're a bit of a creep too." Saying that, she walked into her house, slamming the door shut in my face.

I thought about that conversation all the way home. It bothered me a little when she first said it, but by the time I got home it was a barely contained wildfire, ready to consume a forest. I knew my sister talked about me to her friends, I just didn't know how bad she made me look to them when she did. She was in her bedroom talking on her phone when I walked in the front door. That was something she excelled at, if there were awards for wasting time on the phone she'd be an Olympic champion.

"You said what to him?" I heard her ask. A moment of silence as the person on the other end replied, followed by laughter.

"Beatrice, you're so bad! I can't believe you said that to him. Of course I agree that he's a tool, but that doesn't mean you should have told him that. Maybe he'll quit bugging me now about getting him a date with one of my friends." Silence. "Well, if he does that, he does it with his door shut."

I headed towards my bedroom then changed my mind and decided to go to the garage. Tool, my ass; let's see how much of a tool she thinks I am when I'm done with her. I turned on the garage light, a single dingy bulb that hung on a cord from the ceiling, and walked over to dad's workbench. I knelt down and pulled his large metal tool box out from under the bench. Dad also had a wall rack with outlines of each tool and where there were to

be put when you were done with them. He took a lot of pride in having an organized tool box. I flipped the lid and looked in the top tray. It was full of small items, small sockets on long racks to keep them together. Tiny kits for computer repairs were in there, but nothing that really caught my eye. I lifted it out and set it on the floor. The hacksaw looked interesting as did the tack hammer lying next to it, but the claw hammer looked deadlier. As I reached for it the light reflected off something that was just under it. I moved the hammer to the side and smiled; oh this would be the perfect tool for what I wanted to do. Dad always said that the proper tool made any job easier to do. I grabbed its well worn wooden handle, lifted it out of the tool box and, after replacing the top tray and putting the tool box away, took it with me back into the house.

Even in the kitchen I could hear the faint voice of my sister, still on the phone with Beatrice, no doubt. The light from her bedroom leaked out into the dark hallway as I walked towards her partially open door and looked in. She was lying on her belly on the bed, kicking her feet as she talked. Her toenails were painted with some bizarre polish that sparkled as she moved. On her dresser were pictures of her with the cheerleading team and next to that some from all the dances she had gone to. I haven't ever been to any dance and the way things were going, I probably never would. Her pom-poms sat on the small table next to her bed, beside the trophy she'd won in cheerleading competition last summer. It had always been so easy for her to be popular. Guys practically begged her for a chance to go out on a date. Being seen with her was an almost guaranteed rise in status, unless of course you were me. A headache started to form, it felt like a giant clamp was cranking closed on my head. My vision blurred for a moment with tears and my heart throbbed in my temples as it increased in intensity. For a few moments I just stood there silently, watching the light flash of her toenails like spikes of pain that drove into my skull.

I remembered when we were younger, before she became popular, we were best friends. We did everything together then; she taught me how to ride a bike and even went to the park and helped me learn to play better baseball. Sometimes we'd pitch a tent in the backyard on a hot summer night and lay there telling each other ghost stories until we both fell asleep. A tear rolled down my feverish cheek from the pain and the memories. Whenever she made herself a snack she would always make something for me too. I can't even remember exactly when it happened, but she changed,



her body went from a tomboy to a beautiful young woman. She began dressing differently, instead of old torn t-shirts and jeans she now wore fuzzy sweaters and short skirts. Before, when kids teased me, she'd tell them to shut up, now she joined them and I felt more alone than ever. For a while I thought I was actually making friends, only to find out that they were using me to get close to her. I took lunches at school out by the dumpster next to the kitchen and ate alone. If I ate in the cafeteria someone would knock my lunch on the floor, or thumb me in the back of the head as they walked past, then everyone would laugh at me. Tears ran freer now and the vice on my head tightened.

How many times had she held me when I cried as a boy and now she caused the tears. I remembered the tool in my hand and I looked down at it in a fog. A tool.

That's all I was anymore, a tool to laugh at and use for amusement. The ache ran through my heart, cold and hollow. I leapt from the doorway and, with both hands clamped tightly on it, I drove it through the back of her head. I felt and heard her skull crack and part to let it delve deeper into her thoughts, until it came out just below her right eye, dripping blood. Her back arched and spasmed as I lay on top of her, pressing the awl as hard as I could, deeper and deeper until the wooden handle was flush with her skull. Dad had called it an awl and that seemed fitting to me in some ways. She had taken all of me and laid it bear for amusement to all of her friends; my heart had been gouged out in little chunks as she did it, until there was nothing left. She gave her all for the awl right back in payment. I could hear someone's voice yelling on the phone for her to answer them, but that wasn't going to happen any time soon.

I pulled and jerked back and forth until I was able to yank the awl free. Then I stood and smiled down at the phone lying on the floor and smiled again. It was time to pay Bernice a call and give her my awl too, she certainly deserved it...

## DOG DAYS

*John L. Thompson*

### *Claw Hammer and Rope*

Summer time. The sun's burning bright, iced brews in the cooler by the swimming pool and the buzz has just kicked in. Linda's high as a kite from a few lines of coke. She practices her old stripper moves, using the patio overhang support as a pole to a Gordon Lightfoot tune blaring from the radio. Rufus, a Blue Heeler-Rottweiler mix, is bouncing around the yard chasing flies or whatever's crawling on the ground. Life is good.

The doorbell rings in rapid succession.

I get up slowly'; I'll have to finish watching Linda doing her strip tease in a minute and begrudgingly answer the door.

It's Mr. Peterson.

"You!" The tone has a bad vibe.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your mutt!"

"Rufus?"

"Yeah you dumb shit! Rufus! I had to bury my cat after your dog mauled the shit out of it and the god damned digging up my yard! What the hell is it with this infatuation with my yard? This is the third time!"

El Dorado subdivision, where we live, is thirty-five square acres with only six houses built in it. Rufus hops the fence at night and roams the area but for some reason he likes Peterson's yard the best. I built the fence five foot high, placed railroad ties at the base and still he manages to get out. "I'm sorry, really. I thought he was in the house all night."

"Bullshit! He was out killing my cat!"

"Look, I'm sorry. I'll pay for the damages."

"You damned right and I'll be calling the county dog catcher."

My gut tightens up. "Look, really I'll pay for the damages... in cash. Just let me run to the bank but please don't call the county."

He fumes a few seconds, eyes me through those thick glasses. "Cash. It'd better be cash. \$1500 bucks to be exact for past and present damages."

\$1500 bucks to keep my buddy Rufus alive. "I'll run to the bank and be right over."

I throw on my sandals, hop in the Jeep and haul ass for the bank. Rufus would be just another mutt to anyone else. For some reason I had an attachment to the damned dog and there was no way I could let the county dog catcher get involved. This paying off Peterson would only last so long before he was banging at my door again and more money would change hands.

Too many what-ifs. Best to cut to the chase. I get the money and drove back but before heading over to Peterson's, I stop by my garage. Linda saunters in, hips swaying to some imaginary tune rolling around in her head. "Whatcha doing, babe?"

I find the new bundle of clothes line in a cabinet. "Nothing, doll. Going down to the Peterson place and be right back."

She shrugs; eyes heavy, inhaling on a cigarette. "Make it quick, I'm coming off my high."

"Be right back." I take an old K-bar knife, cut a section of clothes line, cram it in my pocket and drive over to Peterson's.

Peterson's outside, leaning on a shovel, trying to smooth out the areas Rufus had dug up. "I was debating about calling the county if you hadn't showed up."

"I'm glad you didn't." I show him the money in my hand. "Can I have a receipt for this?"

He gives a thin smile. "Come inside and I'll get a receipt for you."

The inside of his house is immaculate, clean to the point of obsessive and the swamp coolers are running full blast. He spent a few minutes looking through a desk and finally produces a receipt book. He lives alone and I heard he owed back property taxes to the county.

I hand over the cash.

Peterson takes it, turns his back, thumbing through the bills and my gut wrenches tight. Without thinking, I wrap the clothes line around his throat and give it hell.

It took a few minutes longer than I thought possible. When a person fights for their very life, they can summon up incredible strength they never realized they had. I had a bigger concern for Rufus' well-being. After several minutes, breathless, I'm standing over his corpse.

"Sorry, Mr. Peterson." Now what the hell to do next?

I look out the back patio door and see the weeds over the leech field blowing in the soft breeze. The idea forms like waves on an ocean. He was

small and thin enough.

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A year later, Linda and Lorraine, her new friend, are doing a drunken strip tease to Canned Heat's 'Let's Work Together' blaring from the CD player in the living room. Their only audience is Rufus and me. The doorbell rings a few times with a degree of urgency.

I open the door and it's the new neighbor, Mr. Bowes, puffing on a huge cigar. After Peterson disappeared, the county confiscated the property then put the place up for auction for back taxes. Mr. Bowes, a retired Teamster from New York, ended up buying it.

"Hey, your dog keeps getting out and shitting in my yard. His piss and digging around just killed off a section. I just had that sod laid in." His voice reminds me of a New Jersey mobster that you see on those mob movies and it's got me scared.

"Sorry."

"Well, no sorry about it. I got a landscaping crew coming out tomorrow to fix that mess then you're going to pay them."

My gut wrenches tight like rubber bands.

He blows a thick cloud of cigar smoke in my face.

"I guess I'll have to pay."

"Good. I expect that money tomorrow and you better keep *your* dog in *your* damned yard or its going to end up dead. *Capish?*"

I pause. The rubber bands tighten up.

He stabbed the cigar at me. "You hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you."

He stormed off like an ancient tug boat belching smoke in its wake, softly cursing. I knew what I had to do. I went to the garage, found a claw hammer and another piece of clothes line. Mr. Bowes was a big man and he wasn't going to fit in the septic tank as neat as Peterson had. I found a hacksaw, spare blades and a hatchet.

Rufus sits there looking at me with those big orange-brown eyes.

AGAINST WHOM ALL OTHER WOMEN SHALL BE MEASURED

Ken Goldman

Tire Iron

Cleaning up the mess of his emotional debris following another bad breakup proved hard work for Christian and he hoped he wouldn't have to increase his office visits to Dr. Spivack to get his mind right. The new rounds of tension headaches were tough to bear and he feared another midnight anxiety attack would send him scrambling for the phone. The therapist had warned Christian not to rouse him from sleep again and resisting that urge became a formidable task.

Proving more difficult was getting rid of the stink. The first couple of days weren't so bad, nothing a few sprays of Lysol and some fresh air couldn't fix. But now there were flies and by mid-week the stench of Melanie's rotting flesh had really kicked in.

"Where to begin?" he spoke aloud to no one.

It seemed odd. The woman had always been concerned about her appearance and took efforts to get her scent just right, daintily spraying behind each ear while taking extra time for her secret places. The proverbial neat freak, she seemed to be forever cleaning up after him. In fact, her meticulous attention to detail had always been Melanie's redeeming quality, one Christian had recalled with fondness moments after he had taken the tire iron to her skull. Blood had spattered everywhere, so much blood.

"Where to begin?"

Christian wished Melanie had remained alive long enough to clean up his mess.

VICE GRIPS THE ROWING CREW

Dave Fragments

Vice Grips

“Cody Samuelson,” a voice echoed over the PA system. A stern-looking, elderly woman stood at the pickup desk, microphone in hand, waiting.

“She’s calling you,” Andy said. Cody pointed to a pair of earbuds.

“Take a message. I left,” Cody said, sarcastically. Andy glared and yanked the earbuds off his buddy.

“Paging Cody Algernon Pigot-Samuelson Junior, whichever of those names you answer to, answer now!” the custom agent's voice echoed over the PA system. Cody jumped at his full name. He shoved his backpack at Andy and stood.

“Yo, lady, just call me Cody.”

“I’m not Yo Lady!” the customs lady barked, folding her arms.

“Uh, I apologize, Ma’am,” Cody said, trying not to act like more of an idiot. Women were seldom seen out of the birthing clinics.

“Sign here and no chitchat. I’m too busy today for chitchat. I don’t know what’s in the box. I don’t care what’s in the box. Silence is golden. Shut up and follow me,” she growled.

“Yes Ma’am. I’m sorry, Ma’am. Thank you Ma’am.” Cody put on an expression so sincere he thought the woman would melt into his deep blue eyes. She didn’t. As they walked to the loading dock, he stuck his tongue out at the back of her head. Andy elbowed him to stop fooling around. A wooden crate waited. Andy picked it off the dock and carried it out to the car. He triggered the trunk release and set the crate inside.

“I’m glad she didn’t ask too many questions,” Andy said.

“She must be sterile ‘cause she’s not pregnant. Even the old ones get pregnant.”

“Ew, that’s disgusting.”

“The way it is. This damn world has too many kids. Uncle Griff the old tight-ass finally gave us a line on one of his Literati Casino nights. We’re going to clean their clocks and drain their wallets. We should make enough to keep the entire team in ‘roids, hash, steaks and still buy a two new racing shells for next season,” Cody answered. Andy got into the

driver's seat and punched up country music on the radio station. Cody switched the radio to head-banging death metal. Andy switched it back and Cody didn't touch it again.

"Did you get the amnesia spray?" Andy asked. Cody shook his head up and down. He drove out of the custom building and a few blocks later, turned down into the basement of their high-rise. The Rowing team owned a penthouse apartment, inheritance of someone's father who died in the plague. The rowing team joked it slept nine and humped twice that for a few dollars more.

"Ah, home sweet penthouse," Cody said, carrying the crate inside. They set it near the fireplace. It contained nine shrink-wrapped costumes. He set them on the table.

"I thought we'd be in tuxedos," Cody lied. He knew exactly what the costumes were and why.

"As long as no one sees my face, I'd go naked. Any instructions with them?" Andy asked.

"Just a vice grips to seal the zipper. Tomorrow after practice, you describe the heist. I'll hand out the costumes."

The next day's practice ran late because traffic on the river limited their rowing lanes. They arrived at the penthouse later than expected. They would have to rush to get to the Casino Night in costume.

"Where's the heist?" Benjamin, the coxswain, spoke up.

"The Estate's about an hour's drive away in the valley. Three tables of blackjack, three poker deals, two craps tables, a bartender and I'll be cashier. Once we get the marks to cough up their cash for chips, a spritz of amnesia gas and we walk away, financed for another season," Andy said.

"You boys are going to love the anonymity of these costumes. We're going to be slick, sexy, twenty-fifth century automatons," Cody said, passing out the bags containing the costumes. He had written their names on each with a magic marker - Benjamin, Billy, Jimmy, Bobby, Joey, Nick, Raul and lastly, Andy and Cody. Surprised voices filled the room as they handled the silvery robot costumes.

"Aw, I had my heart set on wearing Catholic school girl-uniforms with those ugly plaid skirts and silly blazers," Nick said, shaking his silvery suit.

"Sexy and slick. Kind of a waste to show off all our muscles for a bunch of guys." Benjamin shook his crotch and winked. No one cared.

They were all fit and muscular from months of rowing. As long as the suits hid their identities, they were satisfied.

“Uncle Griff says that these suits are woven metal.”

“I think that this thong-like jock strap is not what it seems. Anyone care if I remove my clothing and try it on?” Raul asked politely. He always asked permission to do most anything, even rob the marks.

“Only if we can watch,” came the usual answer. Raul undressed modestly, sliding the jock up his legs, letting the fabric wrap around his equipment and hold it tight. When he pulled the straps tight, the costume enhanced his bulge, making his manhood appear thicker, larger. He admired his reflection in mirror.

“A man can walk proud in this suit,” Raul said, flexing his muscles. Vanity broke out like jailbirds flying the coop. The other rowers yanked their packages open and pulled their clothing off to get see which one would be first into their costume. In less than a minute, they all stood in their own silvery jockstraps, admiring their larger and more impressive appearance.

“The marks might have money but we’re going to look like studs,” Joey said.

Benjamin pulled the body of the suit over his bare feet and up his legs. The suit fit tight against his slender thighs and hips. His arms slid down the sleeves, letting his fingers wiggle into the attached gloves. He had to twist his arms to let his shoulders slip into the torso of the suit before he yanked the back up over his shoulders. Cody helped him pull the mask over his head, covering his body completely.

He became a blank nothingness impossible to identify. Cody clamped the vice grips at the back of Benjamin's head, sealing him inside.

“This is great. I can see better than ever through this stuff,” Benjamin said. The fabric slipped inside his mouth to cover his lips, teeth and tongue. He stretched and tumbled. With the moves, the fabric stuck to his body, molding itself to every muscle, fold, and joint. His face, however, took on an inhuman and otherworldly appearance with its smooth features and blank eyes.

“It’s like I’ve been sprayed with metal paint,” Benjamin said in a strange, new, metallic voice.

“You look great,” Bobby said as Cody helped him pull the suit up over his shoulders. They zipped it closed and sealed it tight. Bobby towered a head taller than any of the other men - long-limbed, metallic, non-descript.

He posed in the mirror with Benjamin. They made a great pair of automatons. Raul had his suit on next. His barrel-chested build made him look like a torpedo on legs of solid steel. Cody sealed the zipper with the vice grips.

“Do me next,” Andy said in an electronically altered voice. Cody sealed his suit with a pat on the back. The suit possessed Andy’s body, pulling tight under his arms, around his chest and against the curves of his thighs and butt. Once again Andy opened his mouth; the fabric slipped inside and altered his lips and teeth. Cody knew his friend was gone. He would never be human again.

Billy, Jimmy and Bobby tugged and pulled their costumes over their bodies and zipped themselves into oblivion. They rubbed their hands over the new, metallic skin, driving out air bubbles and imperfections, glorying in a false dream of riches, fame, and fortune.

“Why don’t all of you wait over there?” Cody said to the already suited team members. They didn’t resist. The suits made them submissive, silently obeying any order.

Typically last, Nick noticed their obedience. He weighed more than 275 pounds with no fat on his body. His costume was truly too small. He struggled to stretch the sleeves over his massive forearms and biceps.

“There are times I wish that I didn’t have all this bulk,” Nick said. Still wearing only the metallic jock strap, Cody helped him stretch the suit over his huge arms and shoulders. Nick’s muscles wouldn’t let his arms extend far enough backward to pull the costume up over his shoulders. Cody had to climb onto the big man and yank the costume to make it fit it over Nick’s shoulders. Closing the zipper over Nick’s back was another episode of pulling and tugging. He stood dripping sweat, puffing, heart pounding when the zipper rested at the back of Nick’s neck. Nick grabbed the vice grips and examined them before Cody could seal him inside the costume. Cody didn’t want to fool around. Uncle Griff warned him to be careful of the suits and he’d already felt the temptation just from this jock he wore.

“Let’s see if the material really does stretch before we seal it,” Nick said, pulling and flexing metal fibers conform to his body.

“Uncle Puck said one size fits all,” Cody insisted. Nick ignored him. Cody worried Nick might still back out. That was the deal: eight thieves for one confession. He got two bottles of beer from the refrigerator. By the time he returned, Nick seemed comfortable. The suit fit his body too tight.

“He’s crazy. This suit fits like vacuum wrap. I’m going to have to cut it off after the party. You do know how to cut this, don’t you?” Nick said, pausing to drink, watching for Cody’s reaction.

“With a scissor,” Cody said, more asking than stating. Nervous, his hands slid under the waistband of his metal jock strap. It left welts where it started attaching to his skin.

“Put your suit on. I want to see how it fits to your body,” Nick ordered.

“I thought I’d wait for Uncle Griff.”

“You thought wrong. We’re a team, remember?”

Jammed by the muscle freak. Cody didn’t want to put the suit on but Nick wouldn’t let him finish and get away without at least putting the suit on. He felt certain he could resist and slip out of it once he crimped Nick’s zipper with the vice grips.

Cody pulled the metal suit over his feet and up his legs. Sock-like boots formed around his feet and ankles. The fabric drew tight against his knees and thighs before he even had the suit over his waist. He wiggled his arms into the sleeves and hands into the gloves. The costume caressed his abs and pecs seductively, stimulating every nerve.

Nick surprised Cody by pulling the fabric tight over his shoulders. Cody forgot to resist and closed his eyes, trying to figure out how to stop Nick. His thoughts wandered far from Nick and rowing and heists. Unwittingly, his hands reached around his neck and helped Nick’s relentless efforts to seal him in the suit. When he felt the zipper slide along the back of his neck at the base of his skull, he quit dreaming and jolted into awareness of how close he was to losing his humanity. Nick was pulling the hood over his head, covering his face.

“Wait, wait, you can’t reach the back of your neck, Mister muscle-bound,” Cody protested through the material. He grabbed the vice grips just in time, preventing Nick from crimping the zipper and sealing him inside the costume. Nick yanked the vice grip away from Cody and held it in front of his face.

“I got the impression you were backing out. You’re not betraying the team, are you?” Nick asked, his now featureless face staring directly into Cody’s featureless face. They still had a chance to be human if they resisted. They retained sufficient control of their minds and bodies to return to humanity, thievery and overpopulation.

“No, I’m loyal to the team,” Cody lied. “Let me finish your costume. Then I’ll seal mine.” Cody took the vice grips in his trembling hands and reached around the back of Nick's head. Nick pulled him away and took the vice grips in hand.

“I’ll tell you what we do. First I’ll seal your suit first and then you can seal mine, like real fast right afterward. If not, I’d think you'd gone and snitched us out, betrayed us. That would make you a rat and you don't want to find out what I do to rats, do you? So we’ll do it my way. You got an objection?”

“No,” Cody whispered.

I'll never get this costume off, and even if I could, in a day or two, I'd find it and put it back on, he thought. He felt the metal fabric bond with his skin and shrink tight, compressing his body. His body wanted this change and he knew that his mind had to follow. Nick must have felt the same effects and deduced the truth.

He didn't move as Nick sealed him inside the suit. He knew Nick was right. They were the brains of the team and had hatched the plot to buy drugs and keep winning. Dutifully, he waited as Nick sealed his fate and then sealed Nick’s costume. He dropped the vice grips.

A complete rowing crew stood in the room in shining silver metallic splendor. Only Nick’s muscularity, Bobby's height and Benjamin's shortness distinguished one from another.

Cody turned back to the mirror. His head was an ovoid with a horizontal ridge above where his blue eyes once existed. A vertical ridge replaced his nose. He felt his waist and torso slimming down as fat drained away, leaving only muscle and bone beneath the costume. Soon he wouldn’t be human. He would be entirely mechanical, an automaton.

No, no, no, he thought, desperate to get away. He picked up his Blackberry and typed a message to Uncle Griff. The reply came back fast: Do nothing. Stand with your teammates. I’ll be there shortly. A command relieved his anxiety. He joined his teammates and felt his body changing into an androgynous, metallic, artificial, automaton.

Numbers and status updates began to fill his mind. Hours passed before Uncle Griff and another man entered the apartment. They brought three automatons, wearing halos designating them as spaceflight ground crew and the medallions of mining corps.

“Another roomful of automatons for the asteroid mines,” one of the crew said. Griff frowned at the nine automatons.

“My nephew snitched on them. A couple hours ago, he sent a text message saying that one of his teammates talked him into wearing a suit. Looks like he got himself trapped. One less mouth to feed. One less criminal to justify in an amnesty program. Honor among thieves.”

“I won’t even handle these suits. The way they’re engineered, one touch is enough. We got too many boys, too many boys. I’m sick of boys. Automatons are so much more inviting than mass starvation.”

“My wife’s already had six boys. Her next will be a girl. We’re lucky. Most plague victims have ten boys before a girl,” Griff said.

“My three sons got caught burgling some fool’s house while high on drugs. I didn’t even wait for a trial. I just sold them to the brothels as pleasure bots.”

“Why?”

“They’re the best pleasure-bots in the joint. I rent them every few months just to see my boys. It’s strange how good they are, even over-sexed. It’s better than prison. They’re a service to all men. If you want your nephew near, I’ll arrange for him to be a pleasure-bot,” the other man said.

How ghastly and perverse we’ve become, Griff thought. He shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing he could do about it.

“Thanks but I already found a solution,” Griff said. His crew placed mining halos on the other automatons’ heads and pushed the LED-studded medallion on each of their chests. The other automatons responded by standing to attention. In a few hours they would be transported off earth.

He pulled Cody aside. Cody wanted to tell his Uncle how wonderful he felt, how good this was, but his body wouldn’t obey his mind. Thoughts ran through his mind like waves on the beach. He was happy in the best way for the first time in his life. He felt his ego dissolving. He remembered a life but he wasn’t that person anymore.

“I’d feel real creepy if I had to rent you as a pleasure-bot.” Griff picked up a halo, changed the dipswitches and placed it on Cody’s head. “I warned you not to steal, not to get involved with drugs and how powerful this material was. The drugs work in minutes to bind it to your body. Your friend must have had five or ten minutes to realize what was happening to him. You have no one to blame but yourself.” Griff stabbed the medallion into Cody’s chest and used the vice grips to attach his nameplate.

“The medallions are radio receivers between your new body and C&C. It’s also designed to keep your metal body in good repair and functioning at peak efficiency. I’ve also upped your gratification index. At least you’ll be happy. You’ll never be independent but you’ll be more than a dime-a-dozen miner-bot slave, fodder for the asteroid mines,’ Griff said.

Muscle changed into hydraulic pumps and motors, bones changed into metal, senses grew digital. Streams of numbers replaced his thoughts. Cody’s ego slipped away and only the desire to please remained. His mind was a computer now, a continuous loop waiting for a real-time interrupt.

Automaton A-47385. Waiting your order, waiting your order, waiting your order, waiting your order...

Unit A-47835 became a nanny. Its first memories were of its new family-John, his partner George and their five orphaned boys got a new BIG BROTHER robot to take care of them. It knew all the good games for boys to play and, as the boys grew older, some of them even followed in its footsteps and became automatons to mine the Oort Cloud or explore Proxima Centauri and Wolf 359.

CHASING THE STORM

Ron Koppelberger

Nail Gun

In chase of the storm. He was in that most absorbing moment, staring at the picture on the wall. It was a picture of a squall and a boat rocking in tall sea waves. The frame hung loose from the portrait and the painting was wrinkled in one corner, revealing a dark cardboard backing. He took the nail gun from the tool chest he had brought into the living room and stared at it, then at the picture. He would fix the portrait, then it would be the perfect image, to chase the storm in perfect harmony with the dawn's light, he thought.

Things that foretell the morning-tide dawn and happenchance, he thought, as he approached the painting with the nail gun. "Pop, Pop, Pop!" went the gun as the tide swelled and the boat continued to rock on the giant sea waves. Riding the storm to islands unbidden, he thought, as he raised the gun again, "Pop, Pop, Pop..."

A long crimson smear and the sneer of a madman, "Pop, Pop, Pop..." went the nail gun into the soft flesh of his business partner. The portrait over his face and the painting just a wrinkled mess, must be perfect, he thought, as he primed the gun for another round of firing. The picture conformed to his partner's face and the nails leaked long rusty red trails across the wall he was propped up against. "Pop, Pop, Pop..." went the gun and the storm and the coming morning sunrise sang in degrees of insanity as he mumbled a curse and looked at his work.

Still the cardboard showed through, along with the crimson gore of a newly fastened picture in hell. His partner had lied and cheated, taking millions from the company and he had been left with nothing except this absurd little painting. He had removed the painting from the office wall where his partner worked. He had thought of the storm and the currents of hate he felt for the man when he formulated his plan of action. Riding the storm, how did that song go? "*take a long holiday and let your children play, Riders on the storm!*" Jim Morrison had it right. Ride the storm, he thought as he admired his work in the new dawn light of the living room.

The sun glowed a bright pink and orange through the spotless window glass and the lace curtains, almost evanescent in its strength. The light warmed him and gave him a healthy aura of exuberance as he worked through the morning on the portrait. In the end he would be caught and the irony was that the painting had been valuable, worth over two million dollars at wholesale. The police had been shocked by the bloody mess, the scene of carnage and anger. When they tried to question him all he said was “In chase of the storm, DON’T YOU SEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE, IN CHASE OF THE STOOOOOOORRRRRRRRRRRRRRM!”

DUCT AND COVER

Ken L. Jones

Duct Tape

Russ Truex had always wanted to own his own business. Ever since he was a child he had envied anyone who was self-employed and was their own boss. After living through World War II he had briefly gone to college on the GI bill but soon realized that an academic life of any kind was not for him. He had always been good with his hands and at fixing things with tools and so he cast about for some way to make his livelihood doing that. After doing some research he came to realize that ice boxes, which had been the standard prior to the War, were now being replaced by electric refrigerators and thousands of them were being snapped up and taken into everyone's homes. These new contraptions would need repairs done on them so he enrolled in a refrigeration course at the local city college in Long Beach, California and graduated with top honors. While he was learning to apply all that he knew from books to the real world, he apprenticed for a time with a well-established privately owned repair shop and then branched out on his own a couple of years later.

Business was good and the competition was fierce but he was very happy in his new trade. He was amazingly proud of the fact that he ran his own business with only the aid of his wife Marge who answered the phones for him and his young son who helped on weekends and holidays. Some of the best times connected with all this occurred when he would go into the Home Service parts house where he not only enjoyed sporting and making jokes with the owner and the two personable counter men there but would also swap business stories and generally try to out joke the other repairman who also frequented the place.

A couple of years into this, the space program started in earnest and Russ, who wished that he could have been an astronaut, followed it ardently. He was so into the race to the moon and everything connected with it that other people would tease him about it. One day, when he came into Home Service to pick up some refrigerator gaskets that he had ordered, Ray, the jovial counter man, said to him.

“I’ve got something that’ll be of great interest to you, Russ. I just had a sample of this sent to me by our regular parts distributor. He only sent me one giant roll as a sample and I was trying to think about who might field test it to the best advantage and then I thought of you.” He held up a big round package about the size of the proverbial fruit cake that everyone dreads getting at Christmas.

Russ was intrigued but couldn’t figure out what it was that he was looking at.

Ray just teased him and said, “Don’t keep us waiting all day, open it up. I think you’re going to like this.”

Russ did as he was instructed and tore the package open. Within it was a new kind of adhesive tape such as he had never encountered before. He of course had seen scotch tape and the masking tape used for painting and even black electrical tape used in wiring jobs but he had never seen anything quite like this. It was gray and very thick and seemed to be the sturdiest tape he had ever seen in his whole life.

“Okay, I’ll bite, what do you use this for?”

“Well, some call it duct tape because it’s been used a little bit in repairing giant commercial air condition systems but then your clever pals down at NASA figured out that this was some kind of a miracle in the making and now they and the brave astronauts down there use this for everything you could imagine. Ever since they found out about it it’s gone up in every space capsule they’ve launched. Now the same people who make this want to bring it out on a massive scale for the whole world to use but first they have to see exactly what use it can be put to by folks like you.”

Russ was more than intrigued by all this and agreed to take it with him to see exactly what he could figure out to do with it. In the next two weeks he came to learn that it was not only good for dozens of repairs that he made on a daily basis in people’s homes but that it had fantastic applications for all kinds of things he had to fix at his home too. He became the unofficial spokesman for duct tape and was constantly talking it up not only to his customers but to his fellow repairman wherever he should meet them.

Russ was a natural born leader who had been the captain of all his sporting teams in high school and a sergeant in the army and he liked most of the repairman that he knew, except for one in particular that he couldn’t

stand. Fred Welk was a crooked repairman and everyone knew it. He had recently hired a neighbor of his, Milton Brazos, to come and help him gouge the public. Now if there were two things that Russ couldn't stand in any repairman it was being dishonest with the public and, if the repairman was married, having him take advantage of any of the lonely females that one encountered on a daily basis as the repairmen made their rounds. No one was more guilty of these twin sins than Fred and Milton. They both openly bragged at the top of their lungs to anyone who would listen about their conquests and about how they ripped off the public at every turn in their transactions with them. Russ really hated how these two were giving repairmen in general a bad name in their business dealings and he was really disgusted by their alley-cat-like sexuality so he tried to steer as clear of them as he possibly could. Then one day he found himself alone with Milton outside of Home Service. He decided to alter Brazos' patented rap about how many married women he had scored with and how many people he had fleeced on repair jobs he had done. Russ changed the topic to duct tape. Milton said he still didn't know what that was exactly and Russ said, "Well, you ought to drop by my shop sometime when I'm in and I'll show you some of the stuff it can do."

Never in a million years had Russ thought that Milton would take him up on his off the cuff invitation. He was surprised, a couple of days later, when he arrived there and saw Milton alone with his wife in the shop. Russ's wife looked flustered and angry like someone had slapped her hard in the face and he couldn't help but notice that her lipstick was slightly smeared. The minute she saw her big strapping husband come in she rose from the desk, grabbed her purse and whispered in his ear: "I've never been so humiliated in all my life... he manhandled me and god knows what might have happened if he hadn't seen you pull up in your truck and backed off."

Marge then awkwardly excused herself after announcing that she had a parent teacher conference to attend out in Anaheim where the Truex family now lived. Seething with rage, Russ almost lashed out the minute she was gone at Milton but being a cool and calculating type who had seen much heavy combat in World War II, he decided to bide his time while he figured out exactly what he wanted to do about all this.

With a low detached voice he asked Milton, "So, what can I do for you today, Milt?"

Milton just grinned to himself like the proverbial cat that just swallowed the canary, “Oh I was just in the area and so I thought I’d drop in and see if you could show me that outer space tape of yours.”

“I hope you weren’t bored while you were waiting for me.”

“No, I was enjoying visiting with your wife. She sure is a pretty little thing. You’re lucky to have her,” he said with something of a chuckle in his voice.

Russ didn’t answer this but instead changed the subject. “Why don’t you come to the back of the shop? I just got my first crate of duct tape from Home Service. If you like it after I show it to you, maybe I’ll let you have a roll.”

Milton stepped into the shop behind Russ and didn’t notice the slow burn the other man was doing. Milton, who had never been in this particular shop before, was looking around, studying everything there and didn’t notice Russ retrieving a fresh roll of the duct tape from out of a box on his work bench and slipping it around his massive fist like it was a pair of brass knuckles. He came up behind the grinning lothario, reared back with the tape and cold cocked Milton in a soft place in the back of his neck. Milton reeled under the impact of the two pound solid roll of space age tape, pitched forward and landed on the cement face first, shattering his eye glasses and knocking loose a couple of teeth and sank into unconsciousness. When he came to a few minutes later he was shocked to see that he was bound tightly at the feet and had his hands hog-tied behind his back with duct tape. He had a giant piece of it over his mouth too. Try as he might he couldn’t do anything about any of it and wasn’t even sure that Houdini himself could have escaped from such a trussing up. Finally figuring out the horrible truth of why Russ had done this to him, he wondered helplessly what would happen next.

“You miserable little worm, it’s bad enough that you and that a-hole Fred go around screwing the public with your business dealings but you have to go around and try to force yourself on anything in a skirt. Well that B.S. ends today. When I’m done with you you’re never going to bother another housewife again.”

What happened to Milton Brazos was a great mystery and the talk of the refrigeration industry. Since he had apparently not told anyone else about his visit to Russ’s Refrigeration, nobody traced his last steps there.

Fred Welk and Milton's poor grieving family posted a modest reward for information leading to Milton's whereabouts but they gained no results.

Marge, catching wind of all this, commented acidly, "Maybe a jealous husband finally got that bastard."

Twenty-five years later Russ passed away after a long brave battle with cancer following Marge who had died of a stroke five years before that and so it fell to his son who did not follow in his father's footsteps to shut the business down and dispose of all the things connected with it. It was a long and tearful process but somehow Russ Jr. managed to struggle through it. Most of the tools, including two complete crates of his father's favorite thing in the world, duct tape, he placed in the trunk of his car for use at his own home. The office furniture he gave to the man next door. The newer refrigerators that were in the shop that didn't belong to customers he sold to long time family friends who picked them up in one of their giant two-ton trucks. The rest was garbage and went in the dumpster. All that was left to sort out was an auxiliary shed in the alleyway in the back of the shop that his father mostly kept full of old refrigerators. Russ Jr. had already made contact with Johnny the Junkie, a sweaty little man who was as tall as he was round and who made money by charging people to pick up their metal recyclables which he sold by the ton out at the scrap yard. Russ Jr. was in the process of sliding the refrigerators out of the shed for Johnny to haul away when he noticed something strange in the back that he had never seen before. There was a rather tall refrigerator that was heavily padlocked, covered in dust and cobwebs and which for some reason was plugged into the only socket and was running. Wondering why this might be he began moving it about and fell back with a gasp when something inside started moving. He attempted to pull the giant padlock off but found that he couldn't do it with his bare hands. Panicking, he ran out through the shop, threw open the trunk of his car and retrieved a giant crowbar, ran back through the shop again and fell upon the lone refrigerator and began prying at the door. As he did so he heard strange guttural noises and, worse than that, the most odious reek that had ever been his displeasure to experience was now escaping from it. Not knowing what else to do he laid into the crowbar one final time and then, freeing the long locked door, he gasped at what he saw. Within its depths was what at first appeared to be an Egyptian mummy but which upon further examination he saw was instead a more modern man who had been meticulously taped from head to toe in duct tape

except for a small area around his nostrils. Russ Jr. dropped the crowbar and started backing off and laughed hysterically at how ridiculous all this was. This was straight out of one of his favorite movies, the 1932 Universal classic *The Mummy*, only whoever this was, it wasn't Boris Karloff and he or it was now debarking from his chilly ersatz tomb and shuffling forward towards him menacingly. Telling himself over and over again that this couldn't possibly be real, Russ Jr. just sat there frozen like a deer in headlights as what was once Milton Brazos now inched towards him on feet which hadn't walked anywhere in a long time.

An hour later Johnny the Junkie finally arrived; called out and looked all over for Russ Jr. Not finding him inside the shop he went out to the auxiliary storage shed and called out. He received no reply but did hear something making some sort of creaking sound. He flipped his butane cigarette lighter on and the room was lit up enough for him to see a pair of feet hanging in midair. Scared out of his wits but too curious not to investigate further, he held up the lighter and saw poor Russ Jr. dangling from the rafters on an intricately woven noose made out of very old duct tape. No clues were found and the police were unsure if it was suicide or some kind of strange murder. If it was a murder the only clue they had were footprints leading away from the scene of the crime that had some kind of material dragging behind them almost as if a mummy had somehow come to life and then shambled away but then nobody really wanted to talk about that because such things only happen in movies .

THE INFECTION

Matthew Wilson

Spanner

Jim was fixing the car when he saw her.

The woman with the baby's head in her hand. He'd have helped her if she hadn't been smiling. That grin, that awful blood coloured smile. Her eyes were milky white and all he wondered was how she might see.

The woman's nose twitched and seemed to follow his fear, walking up his drive.

"What the hell you doing?"

All night the radio had been talking of horrors and mutilations in the city. People were dying and killing beyond death. Junkies no doubt too tanked up to realise their hearts were shot to do the decent thing of lying down and dying. The world needed no maniacs like that.

The baby made no noise as Jim expected, it had to be one of those new store bought doll models for it blinked so realistically. It too was smiling.

"Back off," Jim said. She wore a snow white dress, matted with blood around her belly as if she'd found red wine disagreeable and vomited down her front. The baby's head jiggled in her hand, she found this most amusing.

Jim stood on shaky legs and heard his box of spanners fall off the car roof.

The woman still came toward him, still smiling.

"What is this?"

The woman threw the head like a pumpkin and Jim ducked as it smashed his windscreen, laughing, her gold hair snapping like fire crackers she launched herself forward through the air and bought him down. Jim heard a snap as the wing mirror cushioned his fall, poked into his back and broke away.

Acid poured from her leg like a grinning viper, burned its way toward her eyes.

She laughed and showed her fangs.

Jim's fingers closed around a spanner and bought it hard across her face. Her nose snapped and retreated up into her cheeks; she smiled as teeth fell from her mouth and stung his face like hot hail.

!Get off me, get off!” He hit her again and again until her head hung twisted at a hideous angle, he grabbed her neck and shoved her sideways. The car door dented as they connected and twitching she fell off. Smiling.

“Jesus, what-”

He detected movement from the corner of his eye before he saw the guy.

It was Frank, next door neighbour and drinking buddy.

And he’d just watched him murder a woman!

“Frank, it’s not what it looks like. She came at me. I - Frank?”

One by one the lights in the street went on as screams came from the windows.

Frank walked across the roses he’d treated so tenderly in life. In one hand he had his garden shears; in the other his wife’s severed head.

Both were smiling.

SATED ATTIRE

Ron Koppelberger

Sandpaper

He worked long into the evening, fashioning his garland and the suit. The exterior of the suit was silk and the interior was a reflection of his anger, his unabiding hate for the man. He lined the inside of the suit with sandpaper and when he was done he smiled at his clever creation. Perhaps he would itch and fret, maybe even bleed a bit, great gouts of blood, he thought to himself. Perhaps he'd rub all the flesh from his body leaving a bleach white skeleton, clacking and clinking as it meandered about in the sandpaper. Shiny bones he thought, shiny bones like glass, easy to break, to smash into a thousand bits of splintered refuse.

The hour rapidly approached and he waited with anticipation for the man to don the sandpaper suit. Bloody flesh and scraped skin, leaking in torrents, maybe in buckets of crimson pain, sandpaper for the governor Sir, sandpaper for the governor. He hoped and prayed for the sandy grind against the man's flesh, leaking blood and viscera, spilling to the ground in great stinking heaps. He smiled as the man approached the door to his tailor's shop and he sang with joy.

“Wonderful splatters of blood
For the matters of his crud,
Dripping, oozing in drips and drops,
In snits and spots,
Let the sandpaper march begin with
The pardonable sin!”

The man entered the shop and looked at the suit. “Beautiful, my good man, absolutely splendid!” He stripped of his clothes and put the suit on.

“This is superb, my fine tailor, how did you know of my skin condition? Neverthemind, my man, this is a perfect fit for my dry aching skin, for you see I am affected with scales and dry patches from head to toe, thank you, my man, thank you!”

The man left the shop after paying a small fortune to the tailor. The suit maker sat quietly, wondering at his genius and waiting for the next customer to arrive, his hate lessened by the promise of a job well done.

GET UP AND GO

Kevin L. Jones

Jumper Leads

“Goddamn it, this is not my day!” Jason muttered angrily to himself. He had been returning home after a long grueling day at work when he had ran something over and blown a tire. After he had put on the spare he had gotten back into his car and had tried to be on his way again but when he turned the key nothing happened. The sun had sunk below the horizon while he had been changing the tire. He tried to turn on his headlights but even they wouldn’t work. His battery must have died on him. He reached into his coat pocket and fished out his cell phone. He cursed angrily when it wouldn’t work. He let out a frustrated sigh. “Shit the one time I forget to charge my phone is when I actually need the damn thing!”

He shook his head in disgust and tossed the useless object on to the passenger seat. “Great how am I going to get home now?”

Being something of a curmudgeon, he lived on the outskirts of town. He valued his privacy and liked that he had few neighbors but as he looked around at the dark empty back road, he wished for the very first time that he did not live in such an isolated spot. He got out and was about to begin the three mile hike that would be required to reach his house when he noticed something up ahead. A light was coming from a house at the end of a small access road. Jason thought it strange that he had never noticed this home before. He had driven down this road almost every day and had somehow never seen it. It was almost as if the house had been built over night. He wondered if the owner would let him use the phone so he could call Triple A. He headed up the small blacktop road and as he neared the house he could see an old man sitting in a folding chair in the mouth of his open garage. Jason tried to smile and look friendly as he approached. He introduced himself to the old timer and asked him if he could use his phone.

The old man eyed him suspiciously. “What do you need a phone for?”

“My car’s battery died and I need to call a tow truck,”

The old man pointed at the metal toolbox that sat on the floor next to his car. “I’ve got some jumper cables in there. If you have a mind to push your car over here we’ll see if we can’t get her running again.”

Jason thanked him and headed back to his vehicle. As he pushed it towards the old man's house he couldn't shake the ominous feeling that had come over him. Something about the little out of the way home and its elderly owner gave him the creeps. Against his better judgment he continued forward. He was exhausted and didn't want to have to walk home. This way he would not have to leave his car by the side of the road all night. He pushed his vehicle up to the garage and in no time the old man had the cables hooked up. As Jason charged his battery something odd happened, his whole car shook and vibrated. The hair on his arms stood erect. The air around him seemed alive with some strange power. The old man unhooked the cables and smiled at Jason in a way that totally unnerved him.

"There you go, buddy, that ought to give your car some get up and go."

Jason wondered what he meant by this but didn't want to stay around this creepy place any longer than he had to so he drove off without inquiring any further. As he drove home his car felt odd to him, different in some way that he could not identify. For a split second he relaxed his grip on the steering wheel and it jerked violently from his hands. His car headed off the road and straight for a large tree. He grabbed the wheel and pulled with all his might, barely missing hitting the tree head on. He pulled his car back onto the road. His whole body trembled. He had almost died. How in the hell had that happened? It was like the car had a mind of its own and had tried to crash into the tree on purpose. Jason shook his head, he was being totally ridiculous. His car wasn't alive; he had just lost control for a few seconds. It was really no big deal, he wasn't hurt and his car was undamaged. After what seemed like forever Jason finally reached his home. As he pulled into his garage he suddenly felt very tired, he went straight to bed and tried to put the night's strange events from his mind.

A few hours later he was startled from a dead sleep by the sound of a horn blaring. At first he thought there was some jackass outside making the racket but as he listened more carefully the sound appeared to be coming from his own garage. He leapt from his bed and grabbed a baseball bat from his closet. Whoever was monkeying with his car was going to get his head caved in. He ran into his kitchen and flung open the door that led to his garage but as soon as he stepped inside the noise ceased. Everything was quiet and nothing seemed out of place. The garage door was still locked and his car didn't appear to have been tampered with. He looked around one last

time before heading back into the house but could see nothing amiss. As soon as he got back into bed he began to hear the sound of an engine revving. He muttered, "What the hell is going on around here?"

He ran back out into the garage and his car's engine roared even though there was no one in it. Its headlights flipped on, blinding him. The car's tires squealed as it shot forward, smashing him into the wall. Jason tried to move but his back felt as if it had been snapped in two. His car suddenly jolted backwards and crashed through the garage door. Jason lay on the cement floor of his garage and watched as his car speed off into the night. He didn't think that he had ever seen his old rust bucket go so fast. He laughed as he struggled to breathe. The old man had been right; his car really had been given some get up and go.

BAD BLOOD

Matthew Wilson

Bulldog Snips

My son has never been a football star and, with the thugs round here, maybe that was best. The last thing I wanted was a bully for a son. As a child I had my pigtails pulled and life made a misery.

I thought my boy would be better than them. The bullies of my nightmares.

But then he discovered girls.

And his uncle's tool box.

I'd thought him so much of me he could not possibly be part of his father. My boy never knew him; I didn't even know his name before the police connected him to my rape. I did not abort. My baby was as innocent as me. I'd thought it was all about how one was bought up.

But it's not. It's all about the blood. Bad blood.

No one knows what happened to the little girl down the road, only that she was knocked over the head as she walked to school. When she woke, screaming, she saw someone had snipped her thumb off with bulldog snips.

They didn't take her money. That was not what they wanted.

I wasn't snooping in my son's room as he'd have friends believe. I was looking for his cigarettes for confiscation before I came upon his shirt drawer. And found the severed finger at the bottom. He has quite a collection. So many severed fingers. So much hate for a little boy.

The poison his father shot into me is corrupting him as he plays his days away cutting the heads off roses with those snips. Anything beautiful he seems to have a need of disfiguring.

I was quite a looker in my day.

Before the bullies got tired of yanking my hair and set light to it. The ugly scars made me believe no man would want me. In the end the only one who did, this mad attacker, was the only one I didn't want.

I have deceived myself so long there is any good in him.

My son.

There are many things in the tool box, but the bulldog snips will do fine. I bought him into the world and as such it's my job to remove him from it. Children are such wonderful things.

Lord help me for birthing only monsters.

FOUR WAYS TO SAY I LOVE YOU

Ken Goldman

Pocket Knife

“I want to marry you,” he insisted. He did not go down on one knee. That was for amateurs. Instead he added a simple “I love you.”

She smiled. “Do you? Prove it.”

He pulled a small pocket knife from his jeans and cut off his pinky finger. Without so much as a grimace he handed the digit to her. “How’s this?”

“Impressive,” she said. “But only the pinky? I doubt you’ll miss it.”

Pulling a kerchief from his pocket to contain the bleeding, he swathed the remaining stub in the cloth. Then he cut off his index finger and handed that to her as well. “And now?”

She studied the two bleeding digits in her palm. “Better. But you still have two remaining piggies that haven’t gone to market, plus a thumb, you know.”

He shrugged, and this time he did grimace. Then he cut off his thumb and ring finger, wrapping his entire hand in the soaking cloth. “I prefer to keep the middle piggy home, if you don’t mind. So, will you marry me now?”

The woman laughed long and hard. “Marry you? What makes you think I would marry a man who is into self-mutilation? You must be a complete idiot!” She laughed some more.

“I was afraid of this,” he said. “Well then . . .”

He held up the remaining middle finger, waved it before her face, and walked off.

A SHOVEL IN HELL

John Kujawski

Shovel

I knew I had the ultimate weapon and the ultimate tool in my hand. It was a shovel. Not only was it a shovel, but it was the very one I'd seen my father use. It was often kept in the garage but for some reason someone had left it in the yard during the weekend. It was a big, heavy, metal piece of work that I was thankfully strong enough to lift at the age of nine.

Of course, I had seen many heavy tools before but had never been fascinated by them. The shovel was a different story, though. I loved it because it meant I could dig up the backyard when my parents weren't home and that was exactly what I planned to do on this particular Saturday. I knew what I wanted to discover by digging up the yard. I wanted to dig to hell.

I had heard several stories about hell when I was growing up. I wanted to know all about it. I wanted to meet the people who ended up there and wanted to see what the place looked like. I also wanted to experience the sounds. The sound of someone screaming had often seemed musical to me, as did the sounds of destruction, especially broken glass. I had broken many things and thrown several glass bottles in his years.

I thought about those sounds as I dug into the grass. I had always liked the way the square backyard looked but I liked it better as I dug the hole. Digging made me feel truly powerful. It was an act of aggression and if hell was in fact a violent place, I welcomed it.

I put everything I had into the task. As the hole deepened, I began to laugh to myself, remembering how I'd heard that hell was a place where the devil lived. When people told me about the devil, the whole subject just seemed comical. No one in my life could figure out why.

I knew why the talk of the devil made me laugh. In fact, the whole idea of digging up the yard would probably be amusing to just about everyone who lived on his street. Ultimately, I knew in my heart that I probably wouldn't make it to hell.

However, I did realize one thing. I did have a place to bury my next door neighbor, the man I'd hit in the head and killed with the shovel. He

was the man who'd foolishly walked into my yard. He was the man whose dead body I had shoved into the garage.

I truly had no fear in killing the man. I also knew that I wasn't afraid of hell even if I never found it that afternoon. But of course, I also knew I was the devil.

THE CHAINSAW

David Frazier

Chainsaw

Sharp jerk on the rope
Hold the trigger down
The chainsaw roared to life
A chain spinning round and round
On a shiny steel rail
Oily smoke filled the air

Ski-masked man wields a distorted sword
Swung swiftly side to side
Carves a wide swath through the crowd
Arms and legs everywhere
Piled here and there
Not where they belong

Blood flows down the sewer
A river of thick liquid
Marching bands and twirling girls
Holiday parade turned
Into a killing field
By a crazed individual

He laughed a satanic laugh
Spat on the dead with disdain
They littered Main Street
Police came and shot him
Ending the dread
In our little town

The carnage was complete.

MOTHER'S SEWING LESSONS

J.R. Roper

Electrician's Fish Tape

Ty Jones wiped grease from his hands with a rag musty from its hundredth use. The rumble of Brady's pickup was unmistakable as it chattered up the driveway, a rusted car rolling behind on a tow dolly.

Brady pulled up next to the garage and lowered his window. He turned down the old time rock and roll that blared from his stereo. "Where you want it, Jonesy? Not that you can't move it anywhere you like with your giant loader." Brady laughed

"I'd like to roll it to the pit, if you don't mind."

Brady nodded and expertly maneuvered the junk car through the garage door. He detached it from the dolly and they pushed it over the work pit, the narrow wheel base just wide enough to keep the car from falling in.

"Nice for working underneath, uh?" Brady gestured to the pit.

Ty nodded. "Safer than a hydraulic lift too. Don't trust those damn things."

"No, me neither." Brady crossed his arms over his chest. "What you doing with this one?"

Ty placed a hand on the rusted hood. "Probably just part this one out. Not much money in it with all this rust."

"Your neighbor flagged me down and asked if I'd be parking it next to the road for sale. Nosy old codger, isn't he?" Brady flared his eyebrows.

Ty's forehead warmed and a film of sweat built on his balding head. "He just don't want the township finding him out. Lives in a broken down trailer on that property across the road. Not even his property. The owner lives out east. Said he might build a hunting cabin there someday. Hasn't been back in over a decade."

"Least he can't complain about you then, right?" Brady smiled and patted Ty on the shoulder.

"He'll leave me alone if he knows what's good for him," Ty said.

"Let me know if you need backup, pal."

"Want a beer?" Ty hoped childishly that Brady would stay for a bit.

Brady shook his head. "Got to get home and do some work for the old lady."

"Give her my best." Ty reached out and shook hands with Brady. "Let me know what I owe you."

"Just glad to be rid of it. See you later." Brady smiled, jumped into his pickup and pulled away.

Ty immediately went to work on the car. He pulled out the stereo and the passenger seat, both of which he could get something for online. Then he climbed down a rickety ladder into the work pit and turned on his work lights. The undercarriage looked as rusty as the rest of the body. He considered cutting out bits of the frame for scrap, but that could wait until later. As he switched off the pit lights, footsteps scuffed into his garage.

"What in the hell you doing with that piece of shit?" It was Frank, the old neighbor, his words were a drunken slur.

Ty took a deep breath. "Go home."

"Who was that idiot who dropped it off? Your boyfriend?" Frank chortled to himself.

It wasn't the first time Frank had come over to insult him, but then and there Ty decided it would be the last. Brady was a damn good friend and a much better man than this old drunk. Ty climbed out of the pit and wiped his hands with the rag.

"That why your old lady left?" Frank flashed a toothless grin.

Ty felt the burn bubble beneath his skin and his armpits began to stick with sweat. He grabbed Frank by the collar. "You're going to meet my old lady real soon."

Frank's eyes arched into half moons and his words became quite sober. "I was just messing. I didn't-"

Ty picked him up like a rag doll and smacked him against the car. His body went limp and Ty dropped him into the pit. The old bastard needed a bath in the pond. Ty walked to his toolbox and removed his roll of electrician's fish tape. He used clippers to sharpen the end and unrolled about thirty feet. His mom had taught him to sew and he'd put it to good use.

Ty climbed below, threaded the fish tape through Frank's body and hoisted him to the frame. That done, he went to work stitching him properly until the body was solid against the rusty metal. Ty wiped his hands and threw the rag into his oil bucket. Then he fired up the old loader, pulled out

the car and chained it to the bucket. It was a solid loader, made for building highways; it could pick up a car no problem. Ty brought the car to the back of his property and dropped it into the pond. It sunk below the surface and out of sight. The pond held many secrets. His old lady and her washing machine. A thief and Ty's old television which he'd caught the man stealing in the middle of the night.

After passing his garage and house, Ty continued down the driveway, headed for the old man's trailer in the woods. Soon any evidence that the man lived nearby would be erased. Ty looked to the heavens and thanked his dear mother for teaching him to sew.

THE BRANDS

Thomas M. Malafarina

Branding Irons

Tobias Matthews sat cross-legged on the dusty wood-planked attic floor. The air around him was stiflingly hot and redolent with the musty scent of decades' old cardboard boxes stuffed full with discarded memories. He was completely oblivious to his surroundings, leaning against a wall; chin resting against his chest as a thin stream of drool trickled down, soaking his already sweat-stained tee shirt. He was sound asleep.

He was in the attic on what looked like a hopeless quest, a last ditch effort to find something, anything of value to rescue him from his ever mounting debts. His parents had stored all manner of junk in the attic; surely there was something of value among the debris of their lives. The alcohol he had consumed had overtaken him and he'd fallen asleep.

Something woke him; he came to, looked around at broken dreams and began to cry.

While he lay on his side, sobs hitching in his chest, he saw something which appeared to be very old, barely visible between two stacks of cardboard boxes. It looked like some sort of wooden box or container. Tobias had no idea why the item had suddenly caught his eye. After all, he had spent the past day or so combing through his parents' storage boxes with the hopes of finding something of value, but had struck out completely. He'd not even noticed the box before.

Maybe, just maybe, the old wooden box might hold some jewelry or ancient coins or something else which would free him of his financial woes. Tobias began to move box after box, working his way toward the mysterious wooden container. Sweat seemed to stream from every pore in his body, not just from the extreme heat in the attic but likely from the effects of his alcohol consumption.

After a few strenuous minutes, Tobias reached the unusual box and pulled it out from the shadows into the meager light filtering down from the single naked overhead bulb. From just a cursory look, he could tell the box was very old indeed and must have at least some value to an antique dealer or collector.

It appeared to be a well-crafted, ancient item, hand-made of finely polished wood. He suspected that, even empty, the thing might be worth a good deal of money to the right person. But perhaps he would get lucky; maybe it would be filled with something even more valuable than the box itself. That was exactly what he needed.

Tobias was surprised to find there was no lock or hasp securing the lid. His heart sank, realizing that if it had once held valuables there would have been some means by which it could have been locked. But there was nothing of any sort. He slowly lifted the lid and his disappointment was realized by what he found inside.

The box held a small assortment of very old hand tools. He found a small square-headed wooden mallet, a wooden clamp of some sort, a few flat metal nails, a metal chisel with a wooden handle and two odd tools he could not identify.

“Oh man!” Tobias said aloud with disappointment in the empty room. “Just my lousy luck. No jewelry, no cash, just a bunch of worthless tools.” Although he assumed an antique dealer might be interested in buying the tools, he knew their value would not be sufficient to get him out of his present financial conundrum.

He looked at the raised lid and saw an inscription which appeared to be hand-carved into the underside. “Property of Ezra T. Mathews, Williamsburg, Virginia”. Tobias thought for a moment “Ezra T. Mathews? I spell Matthews with two t’s but this is spelled with one. Could be a relative, I suppose. I don’t recall my parents ever mentioning anyone named Ezra.” Then he remembered his father telling him that his ancestors had been early settlers in the 1600s who had lived in Virginia for a time before eventually migrating north to work in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. Tobias’ grandfather and great-grandfather had been miners but his father and he had both been sufficiently educated and held white collar positions. “This guy Ezra could have been one of my ancestors from way back” Tobias said, wondering just how old the box and tools might be.

He looked again at the two unusual tools. For some unknown reason they seemed to fascinate him. They were made with teardrop shaped wooden handles, appearing to have been hand carved, about four inches long. There were dark metal objects protruding from the wooden handles adding a few more inches to their overall length. Tobias reached into the box and picked them up for a closer inspection.

As soon as his fingers came into contact with the tools, a strange tingling sensation shot through his entire being affecting virtually every nerve ending in his body. It was not as though the tingling feeling was unpleasant, just strange. In fact, it felt quite soothing, perhaps even calming. Then just as quickly as the sensation had started it stopped; his body began to return to normal; making Tobias actually feel a bit disappointed.

What was even stranger was that he now noticed he actually felt much better; the negative effects of the alcohol seemed to have been completely erased. He no longer felt hung over and his senses seemed more alert than they had been in weeks. This resulted in his noticing the foul stench from his accumulated perspiration.

“Man, I stink!” Tobias said aloud. “Whoo, baby! I’m in dire need of a shower!” He headed downstairs to the bathroom – his bathroom now he supposed – to remedy the situation. He left the tool box open on the floor but took the two strange wooden-handled tools with him.

He set the tools down on top of the vanity, turned on the shower and began peeling off his sweat-stained clothing which clung to him as if it had been applied with some sort of vile-smelling adhesive. As he turned to enter the shower, he noticed something about the tools. The darkened metal ends were shaped like two distinct letters; one on the left was a capital letter ‘M’, and the one on the right was a ‘T’.

“Letters?” Tobias pondered to himself. “Humm... I wonder what sort of tools they might be.”

He got into the shower and tried to clear his mind of all of his troubles. He was surprised to find how easy it was. Perhaps it was the pleasant feel of the hot shower, which he always enjoyed, or perhaps it was something else. Whatever the reason, for the first time in a long time, Tobias was beginning to feel like his old self, once again.

He began to think about the two strange tools. In fact, suddenly that seemed to be all he could think about. Something about them had all his attention.

“M and T...” he thought. “M and T... T and M... Hey, wait a minute, T and M. My initials are T M.”

He pulled aside the shower curtain to look at the tools. Instead of sitting in the order M then T they had become reversed.

“What the hell!” Tobias thought. He quickly closed the shower curtain as if to suggest the thin fabric could protect him from whatever weirdness

was taking place a few feet away. He was certain he had set the tools down in the reverse order. But how could that be? How could they now be reversed to match his initials? Perhaps he was mistaken; maybe he had set them down in their current order unconsciously. Yes. He decided that had to be the case, since nothing else made any rational sense.

He continued to shower, wondering what the tools were. He was sure they were very old and probably hand-made. He pondered on how old they were and where they'd come from. He recalled the name scratched on the inner lid of the box and the location, Williamsburg Virginia.

Tobias knew about the colonial Williamsburg tourist attraction where people walked around original buildings from colonial times. Since his family had come to the US as colonists, the man Ezra Mathews with one T might have been his great, great; God only knew how many greats, grandfather. But why would Ezra Mathews have tools with the initials T and M? Wouldn't he have had E and M?

"And what could they possibly have been used for?" he said as the steaming water fell around him. "Maybe they were some type of stamp or marker, or perhaps used to initial sealing wax on envelopes. Maybe they were used to stamp an impression into leather."

When he'd done showering, Tobias looked closer at the strange tools. He checked out the back of the wooden handles. They were intact, not damaged or mushroomed in any way as they might have been had they been struck repeatedly with a mallet or hammer as in the case of a stamping tool.

Then he looked again at the blackened metal tips of the tools and a thought suddenly appeared in his mind. "Brand. These tools could be some sort of branding tools." Tobias recalled the charred ends of his fireplace tools after years of usage and saw the resemblance in the two lettered tools. He was certain they had been used as some sort of branding tools.

He decided he would have to do some research to see if he could locate more information about them. He figured with his knowledge of computers and search engines he had enough rough information to at least get started.

He picked up the two brands; yes, he was now certain the tools were used for branding and as such he could now only think of them that way; and headed down to his late father's study. He powered up the computer, thankful he had bought it for them several years early and had also provided them with a high speed internet connection. He suspected his folks had

hardly ever used it and Tobias had likely used it more since moving into the house with his family than his parents ever would have.

He decided to search based on a variety of combinations of the letters “M”, “T” and the words “brand” and “Virginia”. He first tried “M and T brand” but got no results that looked in any way promising. Then he tried the string, “brand M and T VA” thinking perhaps the abbreviation of Virginia might bring alternative results. Still he had no luck. Then finally he tried “brand M and T Williamsburg VA” hoping that by using the actual town of Williamsburg it might allow the search engine to find something but all he got was similar unsatisfactory results. Tobias felt a bit confused because he didn’t understand how he could be so positive the results he was receiving were not the ones he needed when he had absolutely no idea what he was actually looking for.

Then, as if out of nowhere, a single word popped into his head, “Punishment”. He had no clue where the word came from, but it simply felt right to him. Tobias then typed the string “Williamsburg Virginia Punishment Branding M and T” in the Google search bar. He saw the heading for a URL which he instantly knew was what he needed.

“Colonial Crimes and Punishments: The Colonial Williamsburg ...”. Tobias noticed a brief description of the website listed below the link reading, ““T” for thief was branded on the light-fingered criminal's hand...”

He clicked on the link and was surprised to see a picture, albeit it an obvious Photo-shopped recreation of a horrifying scene from Williamsburg Virginia history. He saw a photo created by someone of a man’s hand being securely held in place about the wrist by another man. Burned into the flesh of the seized open palm was the letter “T”; not just any “T” but the exact same of the very tools he had found. Tobias stared at the tools with his mouth agape.

He spent several hours reading various articles and learned that the courthouse in Colonial Williamsburg Virginia had a very small jail, not suitable for long-term incarceration. There was, however, a gallows constructed in the yard behind the courthouse. There were only two ways an accused criminal could leave the courthouse; being set free or by hanging.

If a criminal were convicted of stealing, before being set free the letter “T” for “Thievery” would be branded into the flesh of his hand. If someone had killed someone, perhaps in a bar fight and it was determined the crime was not premeditated murder but an accident then an “M” for

“Manslaughter” would be branded into his hand. Sometimes these criminals were also forced to spend time in the stocks at the center of town as well before being released.

These brands, permanent and visible to everyone, not only marked the criminals as such for life, but provided a very helpful perpetual record for the Williamsburg judicial system. Because of this, if someone convicted of thievery or manslaughter returned to the courthouse on a similar charge, it was likely that the next time they left the courthouse it would be by dangling from the end of a hangman’s noose.

Tobias was astonished by what he had discovered. He knew without a doubt that the two tools he had found were not cheap replicas; they were actually two of the original branding tools used in the Williamsburg, Virginia settlement. He assumed the tools must have some great financial worth, but that was not what was uppermost in his mind. He wondered how many hands had been branded by the tools, how much pain and punishment they had provided and how many of those who had been branded eventually ended up being hanged for repeat offenses.

As he had gathered his information, Tobias formulated the crux of an idea in the back of his mind. The words “punishment”, “branding”, “guilty”, “conviction” as well as others were bouncing around as if swirling in a mental alphabet soup of disassociated ideas, just waiting to somehow come together to form some sort of clear and understandable concept.

Then, just like before when the words “brand” and “punishment” had miraculously popped into his mind, the jumble of snippets ping-ponging through his brain came to an understanding. Tobias suddenly knew exactly what he must do. He had a mission; one which he believed was placed into his mind by a higher power. He unexpectedly understood everything. All that had happened to him over the past year had not been his fault; not of his own doing. He had been blaming himself for everything and he realized he was not responsible for any of it; in fact, he was the victim. As with any such situation, where there is a victim there must also be an aggressor; a responsible party. Tobias instantly knew, very clearly, each and every one of the offenders who was responsible for his misfortunes.

His company, his boss and all those who made the company’s decisions were the ones who were to blame for him losing his job. They were the ones who insisted on saying it was “nothing personal” and it was “just a business decision”. Tobias knew better; it was personal. It was

always personal when it affected his life. Now he new just how personal it was going to become.

Then there was the bank which held his mortgage and its loan officers with their fancy suits and ties and their manicured fingernails. They were the ones responsible for stealing his home from him. He had worked his butt off for over fifteen years to buy that house and now it was gone. If they hadn't taken his home, none of his problems with his wife would have ever occurred.

Tobias also decided Angie's new lover had to answer for his role in destroying their family. He didn't really blame Angie; he probably should have, but in his confused mind he believed her to be as much of a victim as he was. Her boss had taken advantage of her at a time when she needed a friend. Tobias believed if that man was out of the picture, Angie would come back to him and greet him with open arms. She would beg Tobias to take her back and would be a true and faithful wife from that day on. He was certain of it.

In the case of his parents' deaths, he was unable to find anyone to blame, as that had simply been a tragedy. He did recall, however, how dissatisfied he had been with the way the funeral director had made their faces appear false and waxy as they laid in their coffins. Although it was true their bodies had been badly damaged in the accident, Tobias believed the man could have done more, especially since the majority of his parents' insurance money went to pay for that funeral; the man shouldn't have cut corners. Tobias knew there was only one person, the funeral director who was definitely accountable for that debacle.

He had a clear picture now not only of who was to blame for each of his recent heartaches, but he also knew what he had to do about it. "Punishment" he thought. He looked down at the branding tools he held in his hands and smiled.

Over the course of the next several weeks Tobias systematically hunted down and savagely butchered each of the people he knew had been responsible for his hardships. When he captured them, Tobias made sure their deaths were long, drawn-out, painful, brutal, vicious and bloody.

Each of them was tortured repeatedly and brought to the brink of death, but not finally killed until he was certain he had finished enjoying their hours of suffering. In every case, just before he dealt the final killing

blow, he took his two very special branding tools, heated them with a portable gas torch until they were red hot and then he burned “T” and “M” into the bubbling, steaming flesh of their foreheads as they screamed and pleaded for their deaths.

During his rampage of slaughter, Tobias took absolutely no precautions to protect his identity; his mind was too far gone for him to worry about such trivial things. He believed he was on a mission ordained by a higher power to seek his vengeance and as such he had every right to do so. If the authorities could not bring themselves to understand his responsibility, then so be it. As a result, he left plenty of evidence for the police investigators to follow which of course, eventually led them straight to him. The fact that his initials were burned into the foreheads of his victims was simply the icing on the cake as far as the detectives were concerned.

Before long, Tobias found himself arrested and locked in a prison cell awaiting his trial. He explained to his court appointed attorney that he was simply carrying out a punishment on his attackers and that God himself had justified his actions by providing him with the tools necessary to do what had to be done. Tobias said he felt no remorse for his actions and had no fear for what fate the judicial system might have in store for him. He had done what he had to do and cared nothing for the consequences, whatever they might be. He felt good; very good as he sat on the edge of his cot, alone in his cell, staring down at the floor.

Then, in the silence of his cell, he thought he could hear the distant rumbling of voices; faint but slowly growing louder. It sounded as if he was walking toward a room full of people, but that was not quite correct. Since he was sitting on his bunk and the sound was getting louder, it was more like a crowd of people moving toward him. He couldn’t make out what they were saying as their words all seemed to flow over top of each other, resulting in a steady inaudible humming sound like that of thousands of insects.

He looked across his tiny cell into the shadowed corner from where the sound seemed to be originating. He could see something materializing on the far wall, resembling a painting or a mural of some sort. He couldn’t believe his eyes. In the image there were several men and women dressed in old style colonial clothing all sitting together in some sort of terraced gallery of wooden benches with a podium or lectern at the center. The

translucent image had depth, as if it had been somehow painted in three dimensions.

The incoherent buzzing sound grew louder until it became an earsplitting roar, forcing Tobias to cover ears with his hands. It did little good because he discovered the deafening sounds were not really in his ears but were in his mind. Just before Tobias was sure his brain would explode from the maddening din, the sounds stopped and the room was once again silent.

He cautiously removed his hands from his ears and looked at the mural. It was then that Tobias realized what he was seeing was no longer a painting because paintings didn't move. The group of people appeared to be animatedly engaged in excited silent conversations with each other and some of them were periodically pointing toward Tobias as he sat on his bunk.

Although he couldn't hear a word they spoke he knew they were discussing him. The lead figure at the center of the image sat behind the large wooden podium wearing a dark robe and long white braided wig. The others were dressed in dark colored hand-made clothing which appeared to be fashioned from dyed wool. They were all silently shouting at the same time and attempting to get the attention of the man in the wig.

The man behind the podium slammed down a large gavel and the rest of the men and women in the image closed their mouths obediently. Tobias realized what he was seeing was a seventeenth century courtroom with some sort of drama being played out before his eyes and the man in the wig was most likely a judge. But it was more than that, because the judge was looking directly at Tobias. Impossible as it seemed, the man's eyes were locked on his own and his lips were moving, uttering some sort of accusatory declaration which Tobias couldn't hear or understand.

When the judge's lips stopped moving the man brought down his gavel silently against the podium and, as if on cue, two other men walked into the room each from separate darkened doorways on opposite sides of the image. They wore black hoods with eye holes cut into them and were clad in long black robes. One carried a rope in the shape of a hangman's noose, the other carried something in each hand. The objects glowed bright orange. Tobias recognized them as the branding tools he had found in his parents' attic and which had served him so well during the previous weeks of revenge.

Next, at a signal from the judge the two men; executioners, Tobias realized, turned and began to step from the image, their black leather boots landing with a dull smack on the floor of his jail cell. He was stricken with unimaginable terror as the pair approached him and their shrouded figures surrounded him like a cloak of darkness.

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“What do you supposed happened to him?” the first guard asked, finding the chalky white corpse of Tobias Matthews curled in a semi-circle on the floor of his jail cell.

“I don’t know.” The second replied. “...maybe a seizure of some kind or maybe a heart attack. Whatever, he just saved the taxpayers the expense of a trial.”

The first guard said. “Yeah, you’re right. But... but look at his face. The way his eyes are bugging out of their sockets like he saw the devil himself.”

“Looks almost like something scared the life out of him.” The second agreed. “And look at his hands... the way they’re closed up tight like he’s gripping something.”

“That’ll be one for the medical examiner to figure out. This guy’s as stiff as board right now.”

The guard got on his walkie-talkie and relayed the message about Tobias to his superiors.

Days later, the medical examiner determined the cause of death was asphyxiation apparently caused by Tobias swallowing his own tongue. But there were several things about the death which he could not explain. The first was the appearance of a bruise around Tobias’ neck which appeared to be caused by a rope; yet no rope or anything resembling a rope was found anywhere in the room.

The second, even stranger phenomenon was what the examiner found when he pried open Tobias’ hands, breaking his rigor. In the palm of the left hand was burned the letter “T” and in the right hand the letter “M”.

# THE DRAPER EAR DEFENDER

*Shane Ward*

## *Ear Protectors*

It came by mail, regular postage the normal way one would expect to see a package of its size. Charlie Yates had ordered the ear protection from an online bargain store a few weeks ago and had been waiting patiently for it to arrive.

He had an important interview that could lead him the job of his dreams and he wanted to make a good impression. He had left his old job just weeks earlier because he saw no future in it. With this new one, he saw a chance to progress and make his life important. He wanted to follow his dream and that seemed possible now. So, he reached for the sealed box, unpacked the ear defender and analysed the latest addition to his new toolbox.

It had taken two weeks to gather the equipment needed, mainly because the tools required were expensive and his work was not due to start until tomorrow. With plenty of time to prepare, he inspected the contents and prepared himself mentally.

Carpentry had always been a dream for Charlie. The feeling of creating an object from wood always amazed him. The movement of the required tool, the clarity needed to make art out of a rough, natural object would give him total satisfaction. But to make the best, he had to have the right tools.

Most of the gear he bought came from online stores that offered him the most discount and when he finally finished ordering screwdrivers, saws and blades, someone mentioned that having ear protection would go a long way to saving his hearing. So, with that in mind, Charlie searched the Internet and finally found the right earmuffs.

It all began with advice he found on the Internet. For a nifty price of one pound and free postage and packaging, the red and black earmuffs would provide the ultimate protection from the harsh noise he would be exposed to in his line of work. Charlie could not believe his luck when he stumbled upon the find, so he ordered , waited three days and now he was holding the product in his hands.

Apprehension was high as he peeled back the first layer of sellotape. Upon closer examination, he wondered why the store sealed the box so tight. Most packages he received in the past were glued or had only one layer of tape. Still, nothing wrong with that, the assistant probably wanted to make sure his prized possession got to its destination safely and so he thought nothing of it.

The pale brown box finally had a few slithers of tape remaining, which was easily removed. Cracking the side, he opened it carefully and a whiff of fragranced air rushed out, as if someone had just released an aerosol can of compressed gas. Lights around his home flickered, glass vibrated and the image on the television distorted. This happened in a space of two seconds before everything returned to normal.

Charlie glanced around his sealed room, thought hard for a moment and then passed off the experience as a freak of nature. It was also possible a passing train caused the disturbance, the 6:20 to London.

He peeked into the open box and found it full of creamy blue polystyrene packaging. The smell of prefabricated material sent a buzz to his head and he gave into the urge to bury his hands into the material.

Like an enthusiastic schoolboy, Charlie rustled around inside the soft foam until he felt a hard object with his fingertips. Knowing what he had in his hands, he yanked the object from its nesting place, spilling the small bits of packaging all over his living room floor.

Grinning with joy, Charlie held up the ear protection as if it was the Holy Grail.

It might have seen like a crazy move to an outside observer, but Charlie was not crazy. He simply jumped with joy to finally have the last piece of the puzzle, in this case the last tool needed for his toolbox. Now he could turn up at work ready to start the day without saying, *I can start in a few weeks; I need to gather my things*, as everyone else does. He saw himself as an honest hard working Englishman.

As expected with a job of this nature, it had the strictest of standards: All counts of protection must be worn and employees would have to bring their own tools as none was provided.

Charlie knew he would be starting from the bottom, but with the right tools and motivation, he could impress the boss and move up to the one job he really wanted to do; restoration of ancient buildings and artifacts.

The headgear was in his hands, it would have been easy to try them on and hear the solitude of silence. But if he didn't leave for work, there was a chance he might catch the rush hour traffic and be late. Not the impression he wanted to make.

Charlie glanced over his pre-planned route, confident in his preparation. If he took the local transport, Charlie ran the risk of running late due to rush hour traffic but if he took the Tube, he would only have the crowds to contend with. Passing through the crowds with his big clunky toolbox would be a huge disadvantage. The transport police would probably drag his ass away, assuming his box was filled with explosives. His only option was to drive in. He could beat the traffic and find the right route through. He had over an hour anyway, plenty of time.

Charlie noticed engravings on the box which housed the ear defenders. They appeared to be symbols he'd never seen mixed in with incomprehensible words written in a language unfamiliar to him. He was not much of a historian, but he was sure the words were not English no matter what the period might have been.

Nevertheless, he had to leave or face running late.

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Charlie drove down roads he'd never used before and his SatNav system led him all the way to the front door. He kept his foot to the floor and avoided all the speed traps and cameras. He had a skill for that, but it was when he began to hear the whispers that he almost drove into the back of the car in front.

Once the vehicle stopped, he turned around to see if anyone was in the back seat of his car.

Nothing.

He scanned the floor, behind the back seat and glanced around the outside his vehicle.

It must have been my imagination, Charlie thought to himself. He rammed the gear stick into first and accelerated when the light switched to green.

He drove into the parking lot with ten minutes to spare and glanced around his vehicle one final time before he made his way to the office wedged beside the factory. He was required to report to reception.

As Charlie walked across the car park, a faint breeze whisked in from the west, carrying haunted whispers that sent shivers up his spine. Then, after a moment of chatter, he was swallowed up by the silence.

What the...? he said to himself. *I must be overexcited.*

He glanced towards his wristwatch and seeing it was his interview time, he rushed into the building, forgetting the experience.

The reception was a standard layout; dirty walls with pictures plastered at random locations and a long desk in the corner of the room. Charlie strolled in, placed his toolbox on the floor and mustered up the courage to speak. But before he had the chance to utter a word, the man spoke first.

“Please, take a seat.” He picked up the phone with his sledgehammer fists. “I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

Charlie glanced around the small office like he was a foreigner in a strange land. Compared to the man at the counter, he felt small and wondered if all the workers were built like that.

“Now, how can I help you, sir?” the man asked.

Kill him! Kill him! The whispers demanded. They were much clearer now and Charlie almost jumped out of his skin at the sudden clarity of it.

“Did you hear that?”

The man behind the counter looked puzzled, looked around his small world and replied, “I’m sorry, what?”

Charlie remained rooted to the spot with nothing to say. After a brief pause the other man repeated. “What can I do for you?”

“Sorry, my name’s Charlie Yates. I’ve come for the job interview.”

The man stared down at his desk, rummaged through a pile of papers and glanced at the board behind him. He peeled off a Post-It, smiled, picked up the phone and wedged his rear-end into a small wooden chair. “Charlie. You’re expected. Go down the hall and to your left. The boss is waiting for you.”

Charlie took the opportunity to thank the man before heading to the door. But the moment he opened the door, whispers echoed through his mind again. Was it insanity? Was he losing his marbles? Charlie didn’t know. All he knew was he had to make a good impression and get the job. He needed the money, but more important was the fact he would not get a job opportunity like this again in his life. He had to get it right, first time.

Thankfully the whispering stopped during the interview and the more time passed, the more he forgot about the ordeal. He wondered what caused the strange voices. He could have dismissed the whole incident as temporary insanity, but it didn't feel like that to him. The whispering was as real as someone stood next to him whispering in his ear. He wondered if his past accidents might be the reason behind this. *Perhaps that girl I ran over died?*

As he waited for the supervisor to return to his office, he thought back to the moment when he had that disastrous accident. It was late at night and as he drove along the country roads in the darkness, he came upon a family of travelling people.

He'd never seen anything like this before so he stared at them as he drove past, eyes off the road. Sure he'd seen many of them on the television and heard about them on the newspapers. But he'd never seen them in person and this far out in the country.

Suddenly there was a hard thump and Charlie's car came to a screeching halt.

Assuming he had run over a deer or small animal, Charlie opened his door and glanced back at the dark road. Suddenly he discovered the terrible truth. When he studied the gypsy people camped in the field, he had not been concentrating. A small girl was lying down on the tarmac; he could just see her in his red tail lights.

Worried, he ran up to her still form, bent down, turned her over and was horrified at her mangled appearance. There was no way she could have survived.

Suddenly, her brown eyes opened and she began to yell a horrible shriek at the top of her voice. Charlie saw the gypsies rush over. When the horde of people moved into the red light he saw the gruesome sight.

A deformed army of mutilated people—probably escaped from a circus—leapt towards him in an angry mob of unforgivable hate. He knew it would be suicidal to hang around. The girl was screaming so Charlie thought she would be okay. Fearing for his life at the hands of the vengeful gypsies, he rushed back in his car, closed the door and skidded off into the darkness.

That would be the last he would have heard from them.

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He'd been fortunate enough to keep out of trouble ever since. But the images of those people never left his mind—a band of deformed gypsies, their child run over by his car.

Luckily she was still alive, but what would happen if she died? He never reported the incident to the police and he certainly didn't return to the scene of the crime. After all this time he was sure he'd gotten away with it. The gypsies didn't know his name or address. Even his license plate had been obscured by mud and darkness so his identity surely remained a secret. But the whispers started again and he looked down at his metallic toolbox.

It was completely sealed and protected; nothing could get in or out. The chatter was distorted and he could not understand. Faint and barely audible the whispers were that much louder because of the deadly silence in the room. It made it easier to hear the voices.

"Hello?" Charlie said, trying one more time to pinpoint the whispers. "Is there anyone there?"

*Fool*, those would be the words that would send every demon in the world looking for him. Who would *not* reply to a call like that? It was like ringing the dinner bell for ghosts and demons, although Charlie didn't believe in that kind of stuff. He believed in what he could feel and touch and, so far, the whispers were only his imagination.

The door swung open and the manager walked in, wearing an orange boiler suit, cap and waving a long stick in his hand.

He walked over to his desk, grabbed Charlie's file and closed it. "Yep, you credentials are good for me. Welcome to the team. I see you've come prepared."

"I'm just trying to make an impression," Charlie replied, smiling.

*You know you want to do it. Grab the hacksaw and cut him up... Do it! Do it! That fucker needs it!* Charlie flinched when he heard the whisper again. The words were now clear in his mind. He scratched the back of his neck until his skin bled and the voices stopped. Clenching his teeth he mentally returned to his boss.

"You can put your things in Hendricks' locker and get right to work. Bobby'll show you around."

Just then a hairy ape of a man walked in as if on cue and gave Charlie a nod. Not very enthusiastic, but it was a start.

“We make all kinds of furniture in this warehouse and if you work hard, they’ll be a space for you in the restoration department. Our teams visit prestigious locations all over London, restoring works of art that have survived the pitfalls of time, only if you can prove yourself.

Charlie smiled. “I won’t let you down.”

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For two months Charlie worked for the *Talmadge Company*. He had created so many chairs and tables that he grew sick of the mundane routines: Get up early in the morning. Beat the rush-hour traffic. Enter work, cut, saw and chisel out chairs and tables, clock out and then go home. It was getting tiresome. He could not see any future in this line of work and the high hopes of joining the restoration department dwindled the more he grew tired of his job. The department was full and, despite his short time in the factory, Charlie felt he’d earned himself a step on the ladder.

But the manager wouldn’t allow it. All staff would have to work for more than one year and he hadn’t even completed half a year. But he showed great initiative, always turned up on time and worked very hard. So despite the lack of motivation from all the other staff, surely he should have gained some respect by now?

No, was the answer. His mind continued to hear the whispers and they grew louder by the day. He managed to pinpoint the source; the *Ear Defenders*.

~~~

One day he sat alone in a small room that was used as the cafeteria. It had two vending machines, one for drink and the other for confectionery, a handful of tables and a sink in the corner with kettle on the top. Nice little place once you get used to it.

Charlie had his toolbox beside him as he tucked into a tuna-fish sandwich and a thermos filled with coffee. He gulped down his second cup when he heard the whispers again from his toolbox.

Go on, open the box, try me on, you know you want to carve up a masterpiece.



Charlie put his sandwich on the table and touched the handle on the lock. A shock of electricity shot up his arm and tingled the back of his neck. He could feel a presence and the anger that built up during the day allowed his emotions to run wild. He couldn't help himself, he had to open and see what was inside.

He turned the lock, opened the side compartment and pulled at the handles. The toolbox opened like a flower and in the middle, like some centrepiece of a great display was the ear protector, unused.

It had not been necessary to wear the thing during the two months he'd worked for the company. The only work he had been lumbered with was simple sawing and grazing on the lathe. Even an idiot could do a job like that: get the wood, measure the right length and then cut. How hard was that? He really wanted to join the restoration department, but it turned out he was at the bottom of the list and not progressing.

"Excuse me, could I borrow those ear protectors? I'm operating the big machine and I'd forgotten mine," came a voice from behind him.

Charlie gazed at his toolbox and the whispers vanished. He knew it'd be a bad idea to hand them over, but he gave them to the young man anyway, as if some force had possessed him to do it.

Charlie knew who the man was. His name was Marc and he had joined a day after Charlie. There had been rumours that he was about to be promoted ahead of him. This enraged him and handing over the headgear felt good.

Charlie watched the young lad like a hawk from a distance. He grabbed a piece of wood, measured it to the right length and then fed it into the automatic saw. Nothing out of the ordinary happened for a few minutes.

Marc chopped some wood and seemed happy with the results. He then wiggled the headgear before returning to work. Charlie thought nothing of it and returned to his own task once nothing happened. He was sure something would happen, an explosion that would change the course of his mundane day.

But when he glanced back towards Marc, he saw nothing. *Nothing*. Marc was missing!

Charlie frantically looked for the man who had disappeared. The saw was spinning in its place without a user; he knew something had happened to Marc.

Charlie dropped what he was doing and walked over to the bench. Several tools laid waiting and the cutting saw continued to spin rapidly, begging to eat something. He shut off the racket and the place fell into a moderate silence.

“Hay, George, where’s Marc?” Charlie enquired as he stared at the man next to Marc’s workstation.

“Beats me, I think he’s gone to the toilet.”

“What? At this hour?” Charlie exclaimed.

“Well, you know the score. When you got to go, you got to go.”

“Yeah, but did he appear strange to you?”

“Strange? What do you mean?” George asked, drawing lines on his furniture plans.

“Like he might be possessed?”

“Possessed?” The large man chuckled. “Marc always acted strange. You should know, you’ve been in this company for a few months and he’s always worked opposite you.”

Charlie glanced back towards the empty desk and saw the red and black earmuffs resting on the table. He was convinced that when he first looked, the earmuffs were not there.

Startled by the discovery, he carefully walked up to the ear protectors, which were dangerously close to the saw. Charlie knew he had to return them to the toolbox and lock them away before any more innocent lives were taken. Marc was missing and he was not seen going into the toilet. It would stand to reason that if any tool gave its owner this much discomfort, he should dispose of it in a safe manner. That was exactly what Charlie decided to do. No more worrying, no more whispers. Just grab the damn thing and toss it in the bin. Simple!

Charlie lunged forward; as if the earmuffs would leap from the table and run away. Once he got his hands just inches from the object a sudden screech filled his head.

“Awwwwwww, get out of my head!” Charlie screamed, hands on his ears in a futile attempt to stifle the noise.

“Get out, get out!” he yelled, two stops away from a psychiatric ward.

The screams changed to that of whispers, the whispers became an incomprehensible blend of white noise and the darkness crept in from the corners of his vision. Unable to fight his fate, Charlie didn’t feel the floor as he collapsed in front of all his workers.



When Charlie regained consciousness, he was surprised to learn that only minutes had passed. He didn't understand what had caused the blackout or why the whispers were too loud for him to handle. It stood to reason the earmuffs had something to do with it. He opened his eyes and saw all his concerned colleagues huddled around, curious to what happened.

"Charlie? Charlie, are you okay?"

He got up slowly and gazed around the room. It was a basic office with pictures of furniture hanging on the walls

"Man, you had us worried there!" another man said.

"I must have blacked out."

"You been drinking too much? Don't you know you're supposed to do that on Friday?" someone else joked.

Charlie felt a sudden surge of terror when he saw his toolbox resting beside him. It was open. He raised his head slightly to catch a glimpse of the one object he prayed would not be in there.

When he looked, his heart sank. He'd recognise that red shine anywhere, the black band that wrapped around the user's head. The soft fabric that protected the ears from the defining sound of the outside world. The vacuum of silence that would let subliminal messages in to control his mind. Charlie got up from the sofa and he began to hear the whispers, whispers from the ear defenders, commands that were now clear.

*We want you. We need you,* they said.

Come over. Come over and put us on... Charlie, Charlie, we need you. You are our guide, our will.

Charlie felt the hypnotic bond from the headgear and fighting it became as unimportant as reasoning to a child.

He got up like a possessed zombie and walked over to his toolbox, then picked up the ear protectors. The whispers became loud, like a guide in a storm, commanding him.

Hypnotised by the unrelenting call, he put them on his ears and the concerned calls from his colleagues suddenly vanished. His mundane job was about to start. He would have to carve sticks of wood and make a fine table that would be his crowning achievement. The people in the room appeared as rough outlines of sticks. He grabbed a chisel from his toolbox,

waved it in the air and moved forward, listening to the voices that guided him.

Don't worry about splinters. We'll take care of everything. Just hack up the sticks and make your crowning achievement. That goal you always dreamed of, you can do it.

Everyone in the room screamed in great pain as they fell to the floor in a fit of rage. The hum was like a charming melody to Charlie, while the noise outside shattered glass and ruptured the plaster. With all the sticks on the floor, Charlie began to carve up his masterpiece as he began to chisel all sticks and put them together to make the ultimate object to defy nature.

## SILENT ANGEL

*Matthew Wilson*

*Chisel*

(Posted)

Dear Roger,

I am so sorry to hear that you and Sally have broken up after five years of marriage. She said nothing in her last letter to me, if a girl won't confide in her mother then what can you do? Baby Alex is doing fine and I am sure Sally can't wait to heal herself with her kisses. Please forward her new address so that I may talk to her, girl to girl.

Your affectionate mother in law, Molly Peters.

(By email)

Dear Roger,

It is so wonderful you have broken from your mood. No relationship's perfect, old friend, if we were meant to stay with one fish there wouldn't be an ocean full of them. I hope you come out of your hermitude soon and join me for a drink. To pass the time, get yourself a hobby. Take up painting or sculpture, maybe. I always liked the model of the Eiffel tower you did in university.

Your friend,  
Sam Corbett.

(By post)

Dear Roger Morris,

Thank you for buying half a tonne of ice for your coming ice sculpture. From storing food to birthing ideas from an artist's mind, our suppliers are proud to offer the purest arctic blue crystal for our customers need. Enclosed you'll find a receipt for the unlikely event you wish a refund.

Yours cordially,  
H & M Ice packers.

(By post)

Dear Mr. Morris,

Many thanks for adding your entry – ‘Silent Angel’ - in our sculpture competition. First place earns a cool five thousand dollars and excitement is frenzied for gold as our reputation expands with the care and attention of wonderful people like you. The photos you have sent us show our work is very promising and we would like to take it to our exhibition for closer appraisal. The chisel work in the blue ice is quite unique, you have talent.

Please submit again soon.

Yours, Andrew Beckerman.

Assistant to judges.

(By overnight delivery)

Dear Roger,

I’m getting concerned. Sally has not called me in weeks and I’m worried. Did you receive my first note asking for her address? I can’t sleep at night knowing that she’s out there, alone and maybe too proud or frightened to contact her mother. And Alex is learning to walk. I would hate for her first memory to be of me rather than her real mother. Please reply to this letter ASAP.

Your affectionate mother in law.

Molly Peters.

(By post)

Dear Contestant 345,

Thank you for your entry ‘Silent Angel’ which has entered our competition at the eleventh hour. The work is quite remarkable, where have you been hiding these talents all years? Her face, frozen in an awful scream, must have taken hours and goes well with the image of women trapped in a male world theme you wish to throw across. Please forgive a note so short on talent so long but my schedule is haywire. Enclosed are two tickets for you and your good wife to come and watch the results of the sculpture competition next week.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Beckerman.

(By postcard)

Dear Roger Morris,

Many apologies for the recent damage to your product entrusted in our care. A recent overhaul of personnel at our branch has made it near impossible to reach the goal of excellence we wish to convey and we are horrified to hear such a creation as you have given the world would be treated so barbarically by our men. I can say accidents happen, that ice is slippery and they dropped it by chance, but it is still inexcusable. I enclose a form your consideration to fill out for compensation. I would rather this business go no further. I am sure we can handle this between our respective partners. The damage is minimal and I am sure in your care entirely fixable.

(By post)

Dear Mr. Morris,

Thank you for your patience. It has been chaos here, for some reason the air conditioner repeatedly cuts out and an awful smell is assaulting our staff. Trust in us as your entry in our competition has been moved to the walk in refrigerators with the rest where an all night power generator will keep them good as new while we fix our electrical problems.

The smell is quite something else. A horrendous stench of death. No matter. I shall not bother you with our woes. Only have confidence in the angel you have trusted to our keeping.

(By official notice)

Dear Mr. Morris,

A complaint has been made by your former mother in law, Molly Peters that you are less than forthcoming with details about her daughter's current whereabouts. If you are unable to assist in this matter then procedures will be implemented for you to come willing or unwilling to the station and answer some questions.

(Pinned to door)

Dear tenant,

What little goods I have found in this apartment I have sold to cover the four months' rent you are due me and it is my legal duty to take action on the other four. The rest of your junk I have thrown to the kerb, the clothes I have burned for spite. I always had a bad feeling about you, ever since you and your girl had that last argument that night waking half the damn building you have not been the same since. Spaced out, distant. Do

the world a favour and get yourself a new girl and rejoin the human race. Or at least pay me what you owe.

Until that time you are able to do so you are evicted.

Effective immediate.

(Via transit)

Roger Morris,

32. Blonde, blue eyes. Five foot eleven. Slender. Missing. Please copy this poster and spread across the message boards in town. He is wanted in connection with the murder of his wife, Sally Morris who vanished some weeks ago, discovered by horrified judges, encased in ice, entered in a sculpture competition when a faulty power generator gave out and the entry melted, leaving only the corpse. Death was the result of many stab wounds produced with a sharp instrument to the abdomen. Most likely a chisel.

Police say Mr. Morris is unarmed but mentally unbalanced and the public are advised not to approach.

(Pinned to crib)

Dear mother in law.

Please forgive my absence of late, but I have been very busy.

I think Alex will be better off with me. You were upstairs changing the bed sheets when I came through the window and Alex was sleeping. I didn't wish to wake her. She looks like her mom, a little angel. I am taking her with me, I am sure it would be what her real mother would want.

Yours never more,

Roger Morris.



## IT'S A GIFT

*John H. Dromey*

### *Switchblade*

It was the season for giving, but not for Toby. He was a contrarian. A callous, calculating man who never gave away anything for free—not even a hint of what he might be thinking—for fear he might lose his competitive edge. For him, maintaining a poker face was part of his public persona and not just a useful ploy when playing Texas Hold'em.

As a corollary to his intense dislike for the bestowing of gifts onto others, Toby was not at all a gracious receiver of presents either. He didn't want to be beholden to anyone. He didn't want a handout, or a free ride and he certainly didn't want to rely on the kindness of strangers.

Toby was all about self-reliance. In his relentless pursuit of an independent lifestyle, he consistently worked the opposite side of the fence from the moral high ground occupied by the majority of decent, law-abiding citizens. In other words, Toby was a crook. He took what he wanted, either by stealth or by force.

Wading through a sea of humanity on a crowded city sidewalk, Toby was on high alert. Like a lookout in the crow's-nest of a pirate ship, he scanned the seemingly-endless waves of faces passing by. His primary concern was spotting any possible threats to his wellbeing, but his predatory skills were so deeply-ingrained he could not help but look for potential victims at the same time. There were no easy targets in view. Representatives of the flotsam and jetsam of urban society were much more likely to come out at night.

The ordinary pedestrians were of no special interest to Toby. Even the obvious tourists among them looked like they'd come to town on bargain tours and were not worth a second glance.

In the distance Toby spotted a standout prospect approaching—a fashionably-dressed buxom woman clutching a large handbag.

In his mind's eye he saw himself snatching her purse, concealing the bulky leather bag under his jacket and then losing himself in the frenetic ebb and flow of foot traffic before cautiously working his way back to his tiny studio apartment where he could examine his plunder at his leisure.

Toby did not act on that impulse for a couple of very good reasons. In the first place his custom designed jumbo money belt was already crammed full of banknotes and secondly his conspicuous holiday attire would have prevented him from blending into the crowd.

As the woman drew ever closer, her desirability as a victim diminished more and more. She was way too alert to be caught off-guard. Her darting eyes gave Toby a quick onceover and then she looked right at him and met his gaze directly before moving out of his line of sight.

Toby shuddered. He felt as though the unknown female somehow or other had seen through the veneer of his disguise. That was impossible, of course, unless she could read criminal intent in his posture.

Although he was good at his chosen profession, Toby had never deluded himself by thinking he was a perfect criminal, nor did he pretend that he had just committed a perfect crime. Too many things had gone wrong.

It wasn't Toby's fault. He had had no intention of using violence that day. The by-appointment-only rare coin dealer was entirely to blame. The shopkeeper should not have agreed to a meeting based on Toby's phony references. After making that initial mistake, the merchant should have been intimidated by the switchblade Toby brandished during the holdup but apparently was too amused by the would-be robber's costume to notice the bladed weapon. When Toby gave the man a closer look at the knife, he accidentally made a much deeper cut than he'd planned.

Toby's getaway strategy did not demonstrate any great originality, but to his way of thinking it was inspired. His decision to dress himself in the full regalia of a department store Santa meant he could stride down the sidewalk at a brisk pace as though he were late for work. An added bonus was when his robbery victim bled like a stuck pig, the man's vital red fluid did not deposit a readily apparent stain on Toby's suit.

Just when he thought he was home free, however, Toby felt someone brush against his shoulder.

A uniformed police officer, slightly out of breath from running, stepped in front of the man in the Santa suit and motioned for him to move out of the stream of pedestrian traffic.

Toby complied. He waited for the cop to speak first.

"I'm responding to a citizen's complaint. A pedestrian said she didn't like your looks."

“A woman with a big purse?”

“That’s right. You noticed her, did you?”

“Yes, but I didn’t molest her in any way. No matter what she may have told you, Officer, I wasn’t jaywalking, or littering. You have no probable cause for stopping me.”

“What have we here? A jailhouse lawyer?”

“Maybe I have a record and maybe I don’t. Either way, that doesn’t give you the right to harass me. Don’t you have any serious crimes to investigate?”

“I do,” the officer said. “In fact, a short while ago I received a radio report about a stabbing that took place a couple of blocks from here.”

“You should be on your way then,” Toby said.

“I can only handle one complaint at a time and right now, I’m concerned with gathering evidence that’s closer at hand. I must say my informant was right on in her description of a detail you may not be aware of. She called it a dead giveaway.”

“What’s that?”

“The blood splatter on your otherwise snow white false beard.”

The policeman cuffed the suspect and read him his rights.

“She only saw me up close for a split second,” Toby said. “How could she identify the pattern that quickly?”

“She’s a natural born crime spotter. It’s a gift.”

“More like a curse,” Toby muttered to himself.

# LONG HARD KISS GOODNIGHT

*John L. Thompson*

## *Circular Saw and Butcher's Saw*

"You alright, Burt?"

I know everything but I gotta play this cool. Can't slip up. "Yeah I'm fine."

"Your face says different, maybe that flu shit going around?"

I nod and toss the burning cigarette to the ground and mash on it with a shoe tip. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

It's another one of those damned days when everything goes along too good before they get real shitty. It's near shift change and we got the other detectives milling around. They want no part of the dirty work and hope they don't have to mess with the Vic. The body, or what was left of it, stood to rot another day in the dumpster. It was late June when the flies are getting to be at their worst, lapping at every drop of moisture from the corpse's pores and the maggots are hopping and popping on the rotting flesh.

"The dime's on you, Burt."

The voice is irritating and I have to do this. I know what I have to do but it's the getting up of the nerve that's taking a while. I already know what I'll find. We have an agreement, Mac and me, in which we take turns examining the corpses we run into. One takes notes and the other does all the poking and prodding. It was my turn since Mac took the last one down in Inwood Park near the Tribourgh Bridge, a mob hit victim who had an ax job face-lift. I give a nod and move in, lift myself up and peer into the pool of putrid rot-filled shit stew.

After a few minutes, Mac with hands in his pocket, playing with his change, smiles wide. "Any idea on who or what sex?"

I know but play the part. "Hard telling... thinking female judging by the chest area with what looks like tits. I'm estimating been here for a few days or more." I pause and, with gloved hand, lean over and poke at the milky gray skin where I see a ragged hole in the chest. With the heat, garbage and the rot process, it makes it hard to distinguish if it's a male or female but I ain't sticking my hand down below to look at a vic's package to tell anyone. The stench of rotting linguini, spaghetti and shit dumped

from the neighboring restaurant is overpowering. "Looks like a shot to the chest, large caliber and then dismantled."

"Any other parts? A head maybe?"

I hop down and brush off the maggots from my shirtsleeve. "Nothing. Just a half torso." I light up a Pall Mall to get rid of the stench hung up in my nostrils. "Might find some other parts eventually."

Mac swore then flipped the notepad shut. "So we got a Vic with no real way to identify who they is."

"Sorry, Mac." I blew out a cloud of smoke. "Guess if we look around here and see if maybe the Vic was done dirty in the alley here."

"We'll let the street guys handle that and pass this over to Jefferies and Sweeny." The other two detectives were going through the alley looking for evidence with the street guys and not having any luck, from the looks of things.

I jab a thumb at the waiting morgue people, one wiping the sweat off his fat fucking face like a buttered pig and the other a freckled kid scared like this was his first time lugging a corpse around. I felt bad for him since I knew Fat Ass wouldn't lift a finger to help and I sure hoped to hell the kid hadn't eaten lunch yet. Vomit can ruin a crime scene in a bad way. "The morgue will handle the corpse. We better pass over the info before we have to help lift the Vic out of the dumpster."

"Sure, Burt, you need a lift back to the house?" It was quitting time. We had been running the precinct murder marathon for fifteen hours straight now.

"Still gotta finish working on the Plymouth but it'll be running tonight." I had been hitching rides to and from work for the past week, occasionally catching the patrol car that frequently cruised the neighborhood when it was heading down to the precinct barn.

"We have to talk anyway."

"Something up?"

Mac lit a cig. "Naw, just a private matter."

"Sure." I already knew what he was going to ask.

We passed over the info to the lead detective on scene and he cut us loose. We've got several other cases we're working so we don't need this one. He fired up the '38 Hudson and wheeled out into traffic. We made small talk, mostly about how the Yankees were going to do this season or about 'Bugsy' Siegel eating a bunch of .30 carbine bullets at his Beverly

Hills home before he got to the point. "So, you seen Judy? I know it's a sore spot, Burt, but I gotta ask." Judy was this whore that hitched up with me last year before bouncing over to Mac's waiting arms. She had been back and forth between us now for the past for several months. She couldn't make up her mind on which lap to settle on.

"No, I haven't for several days or better. You know how she can get."

"Sure I do. She got pissed with me and left. She was making crazy talk about me leaving Jolene, which I say I was not going to. Something of a home wrecker thing going on with her. I been married to Jolene for six years and am not going to throw that away. She said she was going to see you."

I smiled. "I told her she was a lousy two bit whore and to fuck off. I didn't want nothing more to do with her after that."

"Maybe she left the two of us?"

"Maybe." I took a drag off the cig. "You know how she gets. Here for a bit then tramping off for a couple weeks then running back to me. Give it a few days, she'll turn up."

"Course." We turn down my street and pull up in front of my house. "So, really no hard feelings?" He held out his hand. Judy had been a bone of contention between the two of us and it strained our working together as partners.

I took it. "No, Mac. No hard feelings."

"Good. I always knew I could count on you, Burt. I'm sorry about all this."

"Don't sweat it."

He drove off with a smile and a lighter heart but mine was heavy as hell. I flicked the butt off into the street before going inside and was greeted by a wave of stifling heat, old blood and the faint hint of the perfume she wore. I tossed off my shirt, NYPD badge and the holstered .45 automatic to the sofa before going into the kitchen, opening the cooler and grabbing a couple brews.

I finished one brew, tossed the empty into the trash and marched off to the garage out back. Opening the door, a wave of rot and decay hits my nostrils. There, in a pool of old blood, were a couple of limbs and her head left on an old burlap tarp laid out in front of my Plymouth. Tonight I have to dispose of them somewhere outside the city limits and finish detail cleaning the car. There was no point in crying over spilt milk anymore. I had to get

the stink and old blood out of it. People seem to notice a car dripping blood. After I blew Judy's shit all over the walls, I took time and cut her up with an electric circular saw and a meat saw before dispersing the parts here and there throughout the city like a Johnny Appleseed. It was a fluke that some wino had found the torso in the dumpster. The trash truck apparently broke down a couple blocks away the day before so the dumpster never got emptied. Have to be more careful.

You see, some things are best kept on the down low and forgotten. I had to admit Judy was one sweet thing that just felt right, no matter what guy she was doing and for some strange reason I felt no ill-will when she ran off into the waiting arms of Mac. She was just that kinda slut. When I met her a year ago, she told me she was 'different'. When men hear a dame say they're different they're thinking down and dirty in the sack, a swinger - and she was. She showed me just how different by having a three-way with her and her friend Belle, some blonde whore that worked at the Blue Light Skid bar near Forty-Third Street. I loved the hell outa that. She was kinky and that's always been my kinda gal.

I lifted her head to eye level. Her eyes were once a bright hazel-green that a man could get lost looking into but now they had turned a cloudy, milky color but she still looked smart. We met a long year ago when things were good, times were better and the sex was like a distant star exploding and engulfing the universe with its primal fire. Holding her head with both hands, I give her a long hard kiss goodnight on those ruby colored cold and rotten lips before stashing her in a paper sack.

"Happy anniversary, Judy." I lean back on the hood of my Plymouth, pop the top off another brew and drink deep.

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

*Thomas M. Malafarina*

### *Nails*

The knife shimmered in the glow of the candlelight; its blade honed to a razor sharp edge. Its scrimshawed ivory handle was amazingly detailed with scenes from the original owner's homeland. Angelo Morelia had no idea where that particular homeland was, nor did he care. He had taken the blade from the cooling dead hand of one of his victims. A china-man was how Angelo thought of the man, although in reality he had no idea where the man had originated. He was obviously some sort of Asian. Angelo didn't consider himself either a racist or a bigot. He liked to think of himself as an equal opportunity businessman.

At that time the only thing he knew or cared about was that someone needed the man to be killed and his doing so netted him a healthy bundle of cash and a nice unsuspected memento to boot. This knife was no longer just a keepsake from a conquest. It had found its way into his personal arsenal of weapons; his tools of the trade.

That trade was murder for hire. On the streets he would have been called a hit man but Angelo preferred to think of himself as the ultimate problem solver. If someone had a nuisance which they needed to have eliminated, they simply contacted Angelo through one of his many non-traceable avenues of communication and the negotiations would begin. Once the deal was set he received half of his payment up front and the remainder when the job was done.

Angelo rewrapped the knife in a fine cloth and placed it in its appropriate drawer in his special tool box. It was a heavy-duty mechanics style metal box on wheels with multiple drawers as well as a few cabinets. It came with a combination lock so that only Angelo could access the contents. This wasn't to suggest that the combination couldn't be deciphered or that some determined person might not be able to force his way in but that was not of immediate concern to Angelo. The purpose of the lock was simply to serve as a deterrent for people who had no business looking into his private business; people such as his wife or teenage daughter.



To the casual observer Angelo Morelia was just another suburbanite living his life day to day and struggling to give his family all the things they felt they needed in this overly materialistic world. His subdivision was a bedroom community where people usually only saw one another on occasions, perhaps giving a friendly wave on the way to work; maybe out doing yard work in the summer or shoveling snow in the winter. For the most part, everyone minded their own business and basically kept to themselves which was perfect for Angelo's needs.

Most of his neighbors knew almost nothing about Angelo, other than he was some sort of independent consultant. He and his family didn't live above their means and, by design, he did all he could to appear to just be another neighbor doing what he could to support his family.

Angelo pulled open the bottom drawer and withdrew a long filament of wire with hand grippers on both ends. He gave a slight smile of pleasure, remembering how well this tool had served him in the past. How many times had he used that little gem? Two times? Three? Funny, but he couldn't recall. But he could remember the sight of his victims' bulging eyes as the garrote did its job of snuffing out their lives.

Perhaps, he thought, if he were lucky he might get to use it again someday soon. He knew it wouldn't be tonight. For this assignment he would be using something more basic and something which he felt was quite mundane. It didn't matter; the customer was paying good money for this job and as such was always right.

His latest project was to eliminate a certain head accountant for an unnamed import/export business. He knew the accountant's name, Bradford Glickman, and that the unidentified owner of the undisclosed business wanted him dead. Apparently the owner had discovered Mr. Glickman had been skimming money from him for many years and transferred the funds into an off-shore account.

Unbeknownst to the felonious Mr. Glickman, his employer had not only managed to locate the funds but had also cleaned out the accounts, transferring the money back to his own bank. This not only included everything Bradford Glickman had stolen from him but everything in the accounts. After all, the soon-to-be-deceased Mr. Glickman would very shortly no longer have any need for the money anyway.

The reason Angelo felt the assignment was to be somewhat unexciting was because the accountant's boss had requested that Mr. Glickman be shot

once right between the eyes at close range; simple direct and to the point. Angelo had offered some other creative alternatives but the customer insisted on short and sweet. Angelo assumed Glickman's boss was also a boring accountant and as such he had reluctantly agreed, understanding that sometimes a job was just a job. There would most certainly be plenty of other opportunities to express his murderous creativity at a later date. For twenty-five thousand dollars in cash he could play it as straight as Glickman's boss wanted.

Angelo could have easily done a bit of digging and found out where Glickman had worked and maybe even discovered the name of the man who was hiring him, but that wasn't how Angelo worked. He earned his living through death and discretion. He found new clients by personal reference and word of mouth. He simply couldn't afford to be too curious. Just do the deed, collect the money and disappear was his motto.

Besides, his daughter Amy was in her junior year at a private high school and was starting to look at several Ivy League colleges. That all cost a lot of money, so just like every other nine to five working stiff, sometimes Angelo had to do what was required, rather than what he might want to do.

He opened one of the deep drawers and removed a Smith and Wesson Model 986 nine millimeter revolver. It held seven shots which would be six more than he would need for tonight's job. He had been looking forward to trying it out. He also had a home-made silencer which he could mount to keep the noise down. It was too bad the gun would have to disappear when he was finished. He hated when he had to give up one of his tools. He tucked the gun into his jeans at the small of his back, pulled his jacket down over it, placed the silencer in his pocket and headed out to his car.

When Angelo arrived at the quiet luxurious suburban colonial which he was told was the home of Bradford Glickman, the sun had set and darkness had fallen. Angelo had also been informed that Glickman's wife and two children were out of town for the weekend, so he would not have to deal with the potential problems associated with family members and collateral damage.

As was his method, Angelo went around to the back of the property and found a basement window which he expertly opened, dropping inside and landing quietly on the cement floor. He was dressed entirely in black and wore a fake beard and mustache as well as a ball cap to disguise himself in the event of outside security cameras at either this or other

homes. He had parked his car several blocks away and had made his way to the property on foot, hopefully without being seen.

Carefully walking through the cluttered cellar, Angelo tiptoed quietly up the wooden open staircase, being cautious to keep his feet over the top of the stair joists to reduce the possibility of loud squeaks. With a skill honed by years of practice, Angelo made it stealthily to the top of the stairs and slowly opened the cellar door which led to a darkened kitchen.

As soon as Angelo began to walk across the kitchen the hair on the back of his neck began to stand on end. Something, he didn't know what, was very wrong. There was a scent in the air, coppery, metallic. It was quite strong and for a moment Angelo thought he could actually taste it in the form of microscopic particles floating through the air. He recognized that smell; it was impossible not to be in his profession and not recognize the scent of blood, lots of it.

From what Angelo could see in the light streaming into the kitchen from the adjacent living room, the kitchen was free of any traces of blood. That meant whatever he now smelled had likely taken place in the living room. Angelo pulled out his gun, screwed on the sound suppressor and held the gripper comfortably in his hand with his finger near the trigger at the ready. He turned and carefully looked into the lighted living room, not sure of what he would find or if he even wanted to know what awaited. His primal instincts were telling him to turn around and leave immediately but he had made a deal for twenty-five large and he couldn't leave until he was certain what had happened.

What Angelo saw when he turned the corner was unlike anything he had ever witnessed in his entire life. Considering he had earned a profitable living murdering people, he had seen quite a bit but nothing prepared him for the vision spread out before his unsuspecting eyes. The only phrase which came to mind to adequately describe the carnage in that living room was charnel house. In the matter of a few seconds, Angelo took in the entire unbelievably gory sight.

It seemed no matter where Angelo looked in the blood splattered living room he found body parts; a hand here, a leg there. Arms, fingers and strips of shredded flesh seemed to be draped over every solid surface in the room. Some dangled from the chandelier while others were draped over lampshades. The tan carpeted floor was saturated with gore and the ceiling, walls and drapes were splattered with crimson droplets.

In the middle of the room, in front of the sofa, Angelo saw one of the most horrid tableaux he could have ever imagined. Lined up in a neat sickening row were four severed heads a man, a woman and even worse, two young children; a boy and a girl. Glickman and his entire family had been torn to pieces. Angelo had been told his family wasn't even supposed to be here tonight. He couldn't begin to imagine what had happened to them.

Most people would have felt sympathy for the murdered family but that was not Angelo's way. After all, bringing death was how he earned his living. Then he remembered his own reason for being here. He was supposed to kill Glickman and it was to be neat and tidy. This house of horrors was anything but. Angelo became furious. He had just realized he was out twenty-five grand. Whoever had done this had cost him a lot of money. Angelo would use all of his resources to find out who had shafted him and they would pay. Oh yes, Angelo would use all of his murderous creativity on them when he found out who the perpetrators were.

He decided it was time to get out of this horrific place but as he started to back out of the living room he saw something out of the corner of his eye. It moved very quickly off to the right. When he turned to look, gun raised and at the ready, there was no one there. At the time he thought he saw the movement he heard a slight swishing sound like a quick breeze. The hairs on the back of his neck were now standing tall as an icy chill raced down his spine. He was back on full alert. Then he thought he saw movement off to his left and once again heard the same swishing sound. What the hell was going on?

Angelo quickly turned his head to the left but once again saw nothing. Yet he had been certain he had seen movement just a millisecond earlier. He stood motionless, eyes and ears searching for any sign of activity. There was none. Once again he began to slowly back out of the room when he saw a slight motion coming from a shadowed corner across the room. Angelo raised his gun and pointed it directly at the corner, shouting, "Whoever you are, you'd better come out here where I can see you or I'm gonna start shooting!"

At first there was no response. Then, after a few interminable seconds, Angelo saw someone walking slowly into the light. He didn't know what he was expecting to find, but it was most certainly not what made its way out of the darkness.

It was a woman; a beautiful, mysterious looking woman wearing a semitransparent evening gown. Angelo assumed at one time the gown had been white but now the thing was old, worn and yellowed; at least in those places which were not splattered with gore. The woman had long, flowing black hair and even from his distance, he could see she had dark, yet glowing enchanting eyes.

She stood completely still, arms hanging limply by her sides. Her lips were blood red which seemed even more accentuated by her milky pale skin. She looked like some sort of specter, something unearthly. Then he realized how such a thought, although appearing real enough, was nothing more than his imagination obviously brought on by the scene of horror which was spread about the room between himself and the strange woman.

Then Angelo wondered if this woman might too be a victim, a survivor of this holocaust. Maybe she had somehow miraculously not been slaughtered in the carnage. Perhaps she had been a house guest who had been sleeping at the time of the murders and awoke to find the massacre. He didn't know and, if he were to be perfectly honest, it really didn't matter.

Unfortunately for the young woman, she had seen Angelo and that alone meant he would have to silence her permanently. Like it or not she had become collateral damage. This thought troubled Angelo, not because he would have to kill the woman, but because he knew he might have to do so in the same fashion as whoever had slaughtered Glickman and his family. He would have to make it look like she was just another victim of the same maniac. He had no idea how he might pull that off.

Despite his profession, Angelo had never committed such a brutally heinous act. In addition, he didn't have the tools with him necessary to replicate the crime. In fact, he wasn't even certain his tool box arsenal contained any tools capable of creating such mayhem. He decided to delay the inevitable for a few moments with the hope of possibly coming up with a more palatable alternative.

"Who are you?" he asked the young woman. "What happened here? Who did this?" He waved his arm gesturing at the carnage before him. "Who killed these people? Why did they let you live?"

The woman just stood staring at Angelo, not saying a word. He began to wonder if perhaps she was in shock. Then he had an idea. He decided in her present condition the woman might be willing to go with him. She seemed almost catatonic enough to simply be led wherever he chose to take

her. The two of them could slip out the back door and walk down the street in the darkness to his car.

Once there he could drive her to a remote location, maybe a place near a lake where he would strip her naked and put a bullet in her head. He smiled when he realized he might have to rape her first to make it look like she was the victim of a sexual assault gone wrong. Angelo liked that idea, especially seeing that flimsy see-through outfit.

“Look.” Angelo said. “I need you to come with me. We have to get out of here. I want to take you... to get help. I’ll drive you to the police station. This place... well... we just can’t stay here.” He hoped his sympathetic voice would be convincing enough to get her to go with him with as little resistance as possible.

Again she didn’t respond nor did her expression change in any way. She simply stood silently across the gruesome expanse of blood and dismemberment, staring at him. For a brief moment of frustration, Angelo considered putting a bullet in her from where he stood and not worrying about whether or not her death was obviously different from that of the Glickman family. He knew both his bullets and gun were untraceable. The cops would rack their brains trying to figure out what had happened, but that wasn’t his problem. In fact, now that he had given the idea some thought he found it quite amusing. He could imagine the local keystone cops stumbling about foolishly. The idea was starting to grow on him. “Why not?” Angelo thought to himself.

He raised his gun and pointed it directly at the silent woman. Then without another word or thought he pulled the trigger. He heard the almost inaudible sound of the silencer as the bullet flew across the room. He heard it strike the wall but impossibly the woman was suddenly gone. How could that be? Angelo had been looking right at the strange woman a second earlier and now she had somehow mysteriously vanished.

Angelo looked around the room but couldn’t find a trace of her anywhere. He took a cautious step backward then stopped as he heard something behind him. It sounded like deep heavy breathing accompanied by a slight trace of a moan or perhaps even a growl. He quickly spun around to find himself staring into the black glowing eyes of the woman who was now standing just a foot or so in front of him.

How was such a thing even possible? He had shot at her a few seconds earlier from a distance of about twenty-five feet. How could she

have not only dodged his bullet but gotten across the room and behind him so quickly? It wasn't humanly possible. "Not humanly possible," he thought again.

His gun was still in his hand and was now pointed directly at the woman. All he had to do was squeeze the trigger. But he realized he couldn't pull it. In fact, Angelo realized he couldn't move at all. The woman's bizarre hypnotic stare had somehow paralyzed him. He tried to break his eyes free from her gaze but he was helpless.

Then he noticed something. For the first time the woman's expression began to change. She acquired a look of satisfaction or perhaps even joy. He realized she was aware she had him right where she wanted him. He also noticed the woman was not nearly as beautiful as she had appeared to be from across the room. Her eerie black eyes were rimmed in red and the flesh hung around them with brown sagging circles. Her breasts now clearly visible through the translucent gown hung limply downward and the pallor of her skin was more of a dusky grey than the milky white he had originally assumed.

Then all at once everything seemed to make a senseless sort of sense. Angelo suddenly knew this woman-like creature had not been a surviving victim at all but somehow had been the one responsible for the bloody massacre. She had slaughtered Glickman and his family. How could she have done it? She had no weapons, no tools.

Angelo tried to move his right index finger. All he needed was enough motion to generate a slight pressure on the trigger and he would splatter this crazy broad's guts all over the kitchen table behind her. But no matter how hard he willed his finger to move, it wouldn't budge.

The woman, never taking her eyes from his, lifted her right hand high enough for Angelo to see it peripherally. The hand was thin, grey and wrinkled with exceptionally long fingers; longer than he had ever seen before. As Angelo looked on helplessly, the fingernails on each finger began to slowly grow; to sprout upward reaching an impossible length of more than three inches. They were a dark yellow color and reflected the light filtering in from the living room.

Angelo could see the nails appeared to be razor sharp. Then the hand seemed to twitch almost imperceptibly and Angelo felt a searing pain in his right wrist followed by a metallic clunk as his gun fell to the floor. Then, in

an instant of clarity, Angelo realized his right hand had accompanied the gun to the carpeted floor.

In agony which he was helpless to express, Angelo looked into the now maniacal glowing black and red eyes of the woman and saw a smile appear on her face for the first time. It was a large hungry smile which exposed all her large yellowed animal-like teeth, especially the two oversized canines stained with crimson gore. It was at that moment Angelo understood everything. Those deadly teeth and razor sharp claws were the tools of this creature's trade. And that trade was savage slaughter, dismemberment and likely consumption of human beings.

Angelo watched powerlessly as her clawed hands rose slowly toward him, wrapping tightly around his throat. The very last thing he felt was his spine shattering as the creature gouged his neck and then twisted his head from his body.

The next day the police investigators arrived at the scene. They had been called by a neighbor who had suspected something was not right at the Glickman house and had peeked in the living room window and seen the bloodbath. The police had managed to identify all of the victims including Angelo but neither they nor Angelo's wife would ever understand what had happened to them or what Angelo had been doing on the scene.



# THEY CALLED ME THE JIGSAW MAN

*Julie R. Kendrick*

## *Jigsaw*

I calculated that I would be arrested by Christmas. That suited me just fine. I do not like Christmas, too much rushing around and fake happiness for my liking. I would much rather shake things up with a bit of murder and mayhem. The month was April so if I killed one person per month, totaling six, then allowing for autopsies and the photo to be distributed, the police would be knocking at my door on approximately 24<sup>th</sup> December. Perfect.

If the truth be told, I had spent a long time planning my rise to infamy. At 50 I had really given life a good go. I'd had jobs, relationships, property, even pets but everything had inevitably turned to shit, just as I had expected. Even as a teenager I knew that everything I tried would fail. I am just that kind of person, one of life's failures. So half a century into my life I realized that I could die tomorrow and very few people would know who I was. You see that doesn't make much sense if you think about it. Supposedly, everyone is put on the earth for a reason, so why am I here? Only one reason left. Murder.

Initially I doubted my ability to actually kill a person, I mean, I don't even like fishing and I have never even owned a gun. So I set about luring stray cats into my yard, grabbing them quick and wringing their necks. The first time, I threw up. I expected to really but it still annoyed me so I grabbed another cat that same day and disposed of it just as quick, this time keeping the contents of my stomach in check. What is it they say? If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. That was me, a trier. The third time I caught a cat I wrung its neck so hard its damn head came off in my hand. That was real messy. Brains and blood and guts spilled everywhere and the smell, Phew! It was a test of strength not to pass out but I managed not to and was actually proud of myself, a feeling I have rarely experienced. I'll admit I wasn't too keen on cleaning up cat innards, especially when I picked up its tiny heart and squished it between my clumsy fingers. Blood shot onto my face and some even went into my open mouth. When I spat, the sputum was red and thick and a string of it flopped out onto my chin. I

wiped it away with the back of my hand and carried on mopping the floor. I was determined to get good at this, casual even.

A month after my first feline victim bit the dust, I felt confident enough to move on to something bigger, plus there were grumblings in the neighborhood about the missing cats. This time I would need a weapon and, after much deliberation and discounting of kitchen utensils, I turned to my toolbox. I picked up a hammer, weighing it in my hands. It was good and solid and would certainly incapacitate anything I hit with it but it meant getting in close and I was fearful that whatever I decided to dispatch next would turn the tables on me and have my arm off. That was when I resolved to rule out dogs. You never knew when they would turn and, unlike cats, would leave you with more than a few scratches. I needed something bigger but not aggressive. This would take some thought.

As it happened it took a lot less thought than I had anticipated. That afternoon I was watching TV and an advertisement came on for goats' milk. Goats! Yep that was the one. Old Brett Hogan kept a whole field of goats about a mile down the road. It would be easy to slip in at night and get me a goat to kill. He wouldn't even miss it. I was satisfied with my plan but anxious to get started so that night I sauntered up the road to the Hogan residence. If anyone saw me I was just out for a stroll. Hopefully no-one would see the heavy object weigh down my left pants leg. I didn't want to have to explain why I was carrying a hammer out on a nice spring evening walk. I needn't have worried, though, I didn't come across a soul. I took this as a sign that I was on the right track and soon I would be adding my first human to my list of kills. The thought excited me so much that it was an effort not to break into a run. I kept calm and soon I could hear the bleating animals that told me I was very close. The fence was a low one, about 4 feet high, with only three horizontal planks running around the entire structure. I took 5 minutes to walk around to the side away from the main track. I came upon a slightly secluded area where a few overgrown bushes shielded the fence from view and quickly hoisted myself over, landing with a quiet thump on the other side. The three goats nearest me gave me a sideways glance and then moved slowly away towards the herd which was lazing back near the main track. I had planned initially to grab the nearest goat, give it a quick whack over the head and then disappear down to the stream nearby as quickly as possible to wash the blood off my hands, but this was going to be difficult now the goats were steadily moving away from me. It

soon became apparent that I would have to wait until total darkness fell when I could ensure that I wouldn't be seen in my pursuit of my first bovid victim.

I sat with my back to fence for about an hour until the sun set and the moon rose. The goats had decided I wasn't a threat and had started to wander back over my way. A light gray one was nearest to me and before I could change my mind I leaped from my hiding place and grabbed the goat around the neck. It bleated loudly in distress and I raised my hammer and brought it down with all my strength on top of the animal's head. As the skull cracked open and blood and brain matter spurted out I saw that I had used the claw end of the hammer; not what I had intended to do but had actually worked out for the better as the goat immediately slumped heavy into my arms and as I let go, fell to the ground. A large pool of blood quickly formed around its head and I watched as its legs twitched and its body spasmed until it finally died. Not wanting to stay around for too long I jumped back over the fence and ran down to the stream. After washing my hands, arms and the hammer I caught my breath and slowly sauntered back down the track toward home. I was still excited and the adrenalin was surging through my veins. I could definitely take a human life now. I was ready.

First things first. I had to make the puzzle. The whole thing depended on the puzzle. I had found a pretty good photo of me, about 5 years old that my neighbor had taken to test out his new camera. I went down to the copy shop in town, blew it up to A5 size and laminated it. Then I went back home and stuck it onto the piece of wood I was going to use. I grabbed my jigsaw from my toolbox and slowly but precisely cut the photo into 6 pieces that fit together perfectly like a jigsaw puzzle. I smiled at my work. This was going to be the best enigma the police had ever dealt with and my infamy would be sealed.

After the goat murder, I was anxious to get on with the plan. A woman first, I thought. At 5 feet 11 tall I was strong but I wanted to start easy. I wasn't going to attack anyone I knew, well not at first, anyway. I needed to give the police time to find the puzzle pieces and I didn't want my name to come up in the investigation too soon. The vagrant woman that lived under the freeway would do for a start. She was old, at least 65, and wouldn't be able to fight me off. So at the start of the month of May I walked down to the freeway at dusk and when I got to the slope leading down to the

underpass I took the hammer from my backpack and held it firm in my right hand, claw facing outward. I half walked-half slipped down the grassy bank and only stopped myself by grabbing onto the concrete entrance wall. I peered around it into the underpass and saw a big bundle of stuff that could have been clothes, or could have been rubbish, but I was betting it was the vagrant woman. Luckily for me there was no-one else around. The moon was out now and the tunnel was lit by four dull yellow lights, two of which flickered intermittently and one that was broken. The ceiling had cracks all the way along and water was dripping through like Chinese water torture. I took a deep breath, put on my gloves, pulled my hood over my head and stepped into the underpass. I strode over to the bundle with purpose but when I reached the pile I couldn't make out the woman amongst all the clothes and rubbish.

“Hey, you,” I called.

There was no reply so I kicked at the bundle and felt my foot hit something solid.

“Hey, old woman, get up.”

This time the bundle stirred and a pair of eyes stared at me out of a filthy face.

“What do you want?” she rasped, her voice sounding like the product of many 100s of cigarettes. I still couldn't see her properly though so I kicked her again and said, “Get up, I want to ask you a question.”

This time she sat up with what seemed like great difficulty and once she was upright without any more thought I brought my hammer out from behind my back and raised it high. I just had time to see the terror in her eyes before I whacked her on the top of her head. I heard her skull shatter and the blood splatter on the wall behind her. I hit her again and again until her head was a mess of blood and brains and I was sure she was as dead as she was going to get. I took off one glove and felt in my pocket for the piece of puzzle I had brought with me. Once I had it in my gloved hand I bend over the dead woman and opened her jaw. Her mouth came open without resistance and I pushed in the puzzle piece, depicting my legs in a baggy pair of Levis, as far as I could into her throat; then I closed her mouth again and covered her up with the clothes and rubbish.

It was a few days before she was found and only then because the smell in the underpass became unbearable. A group of teenagers investigated the mound of clothes and uncovered the dead woman along

with a million or so maggots. One of them threw up, only adding to the vile smell. They all ran off retching and soon the place was teeming with police, the familiar blue and white crime tape blocking off both ends of the tunnel. The next day the murder was in all the papers. It turned out that the woman was called Sharon Hampson and she was only 41. She had become homeless after her husband had died and left her with a bunch of debt. I didn't feel bad. She was now more famous than I was. It had started. There was no going back. Soon enough it would be June and time for another victim.

It was on June 6<sup>th</sup> that I decided hammers were boring. They're not unique enough for a serial killer. Bashing someone's head in was all very well but it didn't scream 'calculated killer', just 'angry madman'. I would have to be more inventive and as I opened my toolbox my eye was drawn to the jigsaw. How poetic! I had used the jigsaw to make the jigsaw and now I was going to use it to kill the victims. I would be called the 'Jigsaw Man'. Oh how I would laugh at the police and media. They would be even more shocked than I originally thought.

I picked my next victim at the library. She was a mousey woman in her 30's. Thin, with a boyish hair cut. I watched her browsing the romantic fiction section and pegged her for a singleton. She borrowed 3 Mills and Boon novels and I followed her out. The only problem I thought may arise was that she didn't seem the type to go out much, especially as she was now stocked up with sappy reading material. I'd have to get her in the day.

I found it boring staking out her apartment block. She didn't appear to work and rarely ventured out, not going any further than the local grocery store for meager supplies. I was fed up and getting itchy for action. On the third day of the stake out she left her apartment at 11.45 and walked down to the store, returning 15 minutes later carrying a brown bag of groceries. This was good. She wouldn't have any hands free when I attacked and this would catch her off guard even more. I quickly ran across the road and into the building. It was only a 3 storey block and I could see her just turning the corner of the stairs leading to the second floor. I took the steps two at a time and caught up with her just as she got to her front door. She was struggling with the bag and her keys so I approached her with a smile.

"Need help there?" I nodded to the keys in her hand.

"Oh, thanks but I'm fine." She had a quiet voice and her eyes didn't quite meet mine when she spoke.

“It's no bother,” I said and gently took the keys from her and inserted them into the lock. The door swung open and she turned to me with a shy smile. She was not expecting the sharp shove into the apartment and she let out a small scream. I kicked the door closed with my foot before she had time to scream louder and grabbed her hair forcing my hand around her mouth. She dropped the bag and struggled against me but she was so little it had no effect. She did however try to bite my fingers so I gave her a stinging slap across her face and pushed her away from me into the small living room. Her eyes were huge and scared. I could see the red mark my hand had made on her cheek start to appear.

“What do you want?” she stammered backing away.

I walked towards her slowly, swinging my backpack off my shoulder and placing it on a small end table. I took a minute to ponder her question. The answer was simple.

“Fame.”

Using the jigsaw was actually fun and so much more rewarding than the hammer. It was, however, considerably messier so I would have to make sure that I got into the houses of the next 4 so that I could wash up when the work was done. The mousey woman, whom I found out from her mail was called Kiera, was a struggler so I was glad I had brought rope and a gag. For a small one she was wriggly and a screamer as I dragged her into her bedroom. After stripping off her clothes I managed to tie her hands behind her back and then secure her to the bedpost. Getting her legs together was more difficult and I had to break her ankles to stop her kicking at me. It would appear that the hammer was not quite redundant yet. When I got the jigsaw out from my backpack I thought her eyes would pop out of their sockets. Sweat beaded on her forehead and snot ran out of her nostrils onto her top lip.

“Now, Kiera,” I said, “you need to stop struggling. This *is* going to happen and I'm sure you would rather it was quick.”

The tears ran down her face and for a split second I hesitated, almost feeling compassion for this helpless mousey woman. It soon passed though and I went to work on her with the tool. I cut off her toes first and laid them on her stomach so she could see them. She had nearly passed out with the pain already. What a spoilsport. I made a few choice cuts into her torso and watched the blood seep into the mattress. She would bleed out pretty quickly from those. I took the gag out of her mouth and watched her lips

form the word “please” before she lost consciousness completely. I untied her hands and ran the jigsaw through each finger, one by one, savoring the crunching noise as it chewed through the small bones. A few minutes later she exhaled her last breath. She looked beautiful to me then. Her mousey hair was splayed out over her pillow and her naked body was lying there surrounded by a pool of deep crimson. I stood looking at her for quite a time before getting the puzzle piece out of my pocket and pushing it into her throat. This piece showed my left arm sleeved in a blue sweater with a gardening glove on. It really said nothing about me, but that was the idea. They couldn't know who I was until the very last puzzle piece was found.

Kiera was found later that day; it was on the 9 o'clock news. I was impressed with how quickly the media had gotten hold of it. They haven't yet linked it to the vagrant woman but once they do the autopsy they would. I wondered if that would be on the news or if was one of those tidbits the police like to keep to themselves.

July and August saw my next two victims bite the dust. July's unfortunate was a young man named Byron, a student. He was easy to attack. He had his head buried in a book right up to his apartment door so when I ran up and pushed him inside he was so shocked he fell over in the hallway, which made it much easier for me to grab and tie his legs. I had started to enjoy using the jigsaw now and completely cut off Byron's hands and feet. I left them strewn around the apartment. I wished I could have been there when they were discovered. His lucky puzzle piece was my right arm, sleeved and gloved.

It was only in August after victim number four, Roland Vance was found that the police finally released to the media that the victims were linked. I killed Roland at night after following him home from his office to a posh house uptown. I had to be quick with this guy because the house showed signs that a woman lived there too and I had no idea when she would be home, so once I had subdued him I cut off his legs and arms and re-arranged them. He looked quite comical with his arms and legs swapped around. After shoving the puzzle piece, showing my middle in the baggy blue nondescript sweater, down his throat I wiped blood on the walls and front door and really made a mess of his perfect designer interior, something I would never have. This time I waited outside in the back yard until the wife came home. Once I heard her ear piercing screams I was satisfied and left, jumping over the back fence.

It was all over the news, "The Jigsaw Man Strikes Again". "City in Terror as Jigsaw Man Claims Fourth Victim". "Who is The Jigsaw Man?" Oh how I relished the fame. It was everything I wanted. I was so excited I wanted to go out and kill my fifth victim as soon as possible but I had promised myself I would stick to the plan. It had to go to the end; that would be the most shocking.

The next man whose life I cut short was the guy who delivered my pizzas. I hadn't been feeling too great with a thick head cold and I really didn't want to venture out. The end of September was fast approaching though and I was determined not to stray from the plan. So on a Sunday evening I ordered my usual Pepperoni and sweetcorn and waited for the guy to arrive. When he rang the door bell I opened the door as quick as a flash and dragged him inside my house. He still had his motorcycle helmet on so bashing him over the head with the hammer wasn't going to work this time but what was in my favor was the heavy leathers he was wearing stifled his movements. I quickly kicked his legs out from under him and tied his feet and hands together in a knot so he was forced to sit forward in an uncomfortable position. I took my time in taking his helmet off. In fact I chopped it off with the jigsaw, one piece at a time. The vibrations must have been immense through the protective headgear. Once the helmet was off I noticed that I had made deep lacerations through his ears and head and blood was matting his hair and running down his face. I cut a large flap into his left cheek and slowly peeled it downwards, exposing the facial tendons and ligaments there. He was far too injured to scream now and to be honest I was glad. I was, after all, in my own home and had yet to think of a way to dispose of the pizza dude. He took quite a while to die so I played with him until he did. I put the puzzle piece into his throat before he expired and I watched him try to swallow it. I stuck a ball point pen into his left eye and pulled it out onto his damaged cheek, letting it hang by the optic nerve, swinging from side to side as he moved. I cut off his penis with the jigsaw and put it in his right hand. He bled out pretty quickly after that and I got to work cleaning up. I was glad I'd had the forethought to put him in my bath; at least the mess was localized. I realized that I would have to come up with a good lie when the police called round and they would, because it would be on record that I was the last person to have ordered pizza. I went to bed satisfied that I had done a good job and slept soundly.



The next morning, before dawn, I loaded up my car with the pizza dude in a black rubbish sack and disposed of him with the rest of the trash out the back of the local drugstore and quickly drove back to home to dispose of his scooter. I put it in my garage for now. I was confident the police wouldn't search my house before the finale so the scooter would be safe for the time being.

Sure enough, later that afternoon the cops came calling. I said that I had received my pizza and that the delivery guy had gone on his way. I took a risk and asked them if they would like to come in and see the pizza box. They declined and gave me a card asking me to contact them if I thought of anything else. I did a little victory jig when I closed the door.

The next morning the headlines screamed "Jigsaw Man claims fifth victim", "How many more victims for the Jigsaw Man" and a police spokesman was on channel nine urging everyone not to panic but to stay in pairs and lock their doors. The usual platitudes. I was very shocked however when the cop mentioned the puzzle pieces. In fact they had a picture of the incomplete puzzle with the caption "Do You Know The Jigsaw Man?" It didn't worry me because I knew I would not be identified by that picture alone. My face was the missing piece and once they had that they wouldn't need an appeal. They would come straight to my door.

I did, however feel that I needed to claim my last victim just a little sooner than planned. I just didn't want to risk the game being over sooner than I had anticipated.

My last victim had been chosen from the outset and I couldn't wait to get to this one. It was December; the time was now and as I walked to her address with my backpack in my hand, a well of excitement bubbled up inside me. This was it. My piece de resistance, the thing the whole plan hinged on. I walked up to the door and knocked once. A few seconds later the door was opened. I smiled.

"Hi, Mom," I said and closed the door behind me.

Oh how my mother screamed. She really fought for her life and had much more stamina than I had given her credit for. I was glad that her nearest neighbor was half a mile away. There was no one to hear and rescue her. Once I had subdued her with a few blows from my trusty hammer, I cut out her tongue with the jigsaw. I felt that it served her right for never encouraging me to be the best, never giving me the right opportunities and for never telling me she loved me. Now she wouldn't say anything ever

again. As I slowly made cuts in her arms, legs, torso and head she never took her eyes off me. She held my gaze and still I saw disappointment there. I couldn't bear to look at her face so I blindfolded her. This was the first murder that I had committed where I felt true rage. I wanted not only to kill my mother but to destroy her. I hacked away at her arms and legs, cut her body in half and chopped off her head. Finally the bloody mess of bones and meat did not look like my mother any more. I picked up her head and pushed the last piece of the puzzle, showing my smiling face, into her mouth. As I closed her jaw, the blindfold slipped and I saw that her lifeless eyes were wide open and staring, staring into my own eyes, disappointment etched on her dead face forever. In a last act of rage I threw her head outside into the yard as far as I could. I walked away from her for the final time and went home. It was done. The plan was complete and I was tired.

I didn't bother to watch the news. Tomorrow I would *be* the news. Once the autopsy was done, they would fit the final piece of the puzzle in place. I would be arrested soon after and the crime would shock the USA to the core. The Jigsaw Man would be revealed.

I didn't bother to go to bed that night, I knew they would come early to try to get the upper hand with the element of surprise, but I was finished now and would be waiting. At 4.38 am I saw the armored truck slowly pull up to my house and eight armed SWAT cops crept up to and around the building. A detective in a dark suit walked up to my front door and knocked. I opened it just as he was about to call out and I smiled at him.

"Hello, detective."

I walked forward with my arms held high.

The detective looked at me and shook his head in sadness and disbelief, took out his handcuffs and said in a loud voice so that the other cops could hear,

"Mary-Lou Spencer, you are under arrest for the murders of six people, including your mother." He cuffed me and walked me out to the truck. As I walked past the SWAT team I heard one of them say, "My wife wouldn't even know where my toolbox is."

I turned and caught his eye, winked at him and said, "Best you don't piss her off then."

I had fulfilled my purpose. I was famous.

It was Christmas Eve.

## FOREST DREAMS

*Ron Koppelberger*

### *Hacksaw*

He finds himself tempted by the fire, almost overwhelmingly. The dark phantasms that whisper his name over and over again, “Almar Downy, Almar Downy!” He lays unsleeping except for the waking dream, the dream of flames and perdition. He stands before a forest of tall iron pines, there is no way through the wood... except for the hacksaw. He approaches the first tree and begins sawing the lower branches off of it. Soon he has a pile of timber, it must burn, he thinks. Lighting a match, he sets the pile of branches on fire then begins sawing at another of the trees and another and another until he has giant heaps of timber to burn. Perhaps he will see his way to the other side of the woods.

The day moves forward into the twilight hours of dusk and still Downy finds himself burning and sawing at the trees. The first sliver of moonlight shines through the trees and the bright orange glow of the fires cast a hazy aura into the dense tree line. “Almar Downy,” they whisper again. “Almar Downy...”

He saws at the branches until the piles overwhelm the terrain, piles of burning brush in great conflagrations. In the end the woods catch the flame and the tall iron pines light the night sky with a burnt umber glow, smoky and hot. Near morning tide the forest has revealed itself as ash and soot, a once proud enclave for those who seek shelter from the edge of the world. The edge of the world and this is what Almar found on the other side.

Tall buildings crumbling with decay and great mountains of refuse, a small dirty pond filled with plastic containers and tin cans. A reflection of what lay just beyond the forest.

Almar walked over to the small dirty pool of water and looked at his reflection there and he saw tired eyes, dark half moons and dirty smudges of soot across his face. Had he dreamed all of this or was this his fate?

He stood before the tall pine with hacksaw in hand and looked forward, in that moment he realized that it was not the view to the other side that he wanted and instead he built a house from the surrounding trees, a place to hide from the other side and a shelter against the future, for one day

he would have to go to that pond and look into it, but for now the forest would remain his shelter and his sanctity, his peace of mind like the soul of a wise owl who knows the way.

## A ROOM FULL OF EYES

*Robert Evangelista*

*Secateurs*

The half-full bucket of water unleashed its contents over the sleeping man's face, bringing him gasping and spluttering back to consciousness. He writhed on the table as his lungs forced the liquid he had ingested back up his throat. The light made it hard for him to see but he knew two things: he was naked and he was tied to something which made it impossible to move his arms and legs.

As he took in his first deep gulps of air, the acrid smell filled his lungs and he almost retched. He shook his head as the coughing passed and blinked rapidly, trying to regain his vision.

"Sorry, kid," a voice spoke, old, gruff. "We're getting close to show time, can't have you sleepin' through the action."

"What the fuck's going on?" The young man was wide awake now, aware that things were most certainly not normal. He squinted to avoid the bright lamp pointed down at him and craned his neck to get a look at his captor. His vision was still not clear; all he could make out was a green top and a big grey beard.

"You fucked up, kid," the man said. "Put your dick in the wrong hole and now you're here." Not much was known about the old man even by the locals in town; he went by the name Mac, rarely was seen off his property and was a straight shooter in both senses of the word, "Cryin' shame, I know." With this he walked off out of view and a moment later the sound of clanking and clicking was heard. "Where the hell?" The rustling continued as the old man muttered under his breath.

As he lay there, the young man again noticed the smell pervading the air, a powerful mix of what could only be described as death, rot and human odours all broiling together. He strained his neck to see around the room. Everywhere he looked were animals, stuffed animals. They lined the walls and floors, poised to attack or run or fly. The light made it hard to see properly but the room was small enough to look crowded with all the creatures surrounding him. The walls looked like lengths of timber; it reminded him of a cabin. Plaques adorned most of the inside with animals

of air, land and sea mounted upon them. The majority bore large stains seemingly having leaked from their centrepieces down the walls.

“Where the hell am I?” He contorted his body to try and get a better look at what was going on around him. ”C’mon man, you gotta have the wrong guy.”

Mac walked back with a large toolbox. He put it on a table just behind where the young man lay, opened it up and continued to rummage through the contents. Once the sound of clashing metal on metal had stopped the old man walked around to again look at his captive. He pointed something at him as he spoke. “Your name Fred?”

The young man looked up with a silent fear in his eyes; his first clear view of the old man took him aback.

“Fred Adsworth, that’s what your driver’s license says.” He didn’t need or wait for a response. “And I’ll bet a hundred bucks you been fuckin’ a young lady by the name of Betty.”

Fred tried to talk but no more than a mutter escaped his lips. Confusion swept through his mind like wildfire as he tried to find another piece of the puzzle he found himself in. He searched the room over and over, the animals all seemed to be watching like onlookers at a medical operation; it unnerved him. There was what seemed to be a lens above him, a camera he thought, but he didn’t consider this a prank; he had never told anyone of his relationship with her. Who was this man?

“Yeah that’s a camera,” said Mac, Fred was unaware his gaze had stopped on the lens pointed at him. “That’s why you gotta be awake; we got five minutes before you’re on.” Again the old man walked off, the remark stirring Fred’s anxieties to their breaking point.

“What the fuck, man, c’mon, don’t fuck with me!” There was distinct panic in his voice, a quiver breaking through every syllable. “I didn’t do anything wrong, man, c’mon, you’re scaring the shit out of me.” As he shifted on the table he could feel the holes lining the entire surface of his makeshift bed pressing into his shoulders and back, he was certain his heels were bleeding.

A scraping sound could be heard from where the old man stood, a blade being sharpened, the sound was threatening. “Ready or not, here I come,” said Mac as he finished. He had a melodic lilt in his voice which made it all the more terrifying to hear for someone in Fred’s position.

The young man lay stripped naked, legs and arms cable tied to the steel operating table. Mac surveyed his work, running his gaze over Fred's body, occasionally reaching up with his left hand to make sure there was minimal movement in his limbs. The young man winced in pain as he grabbed his foot and shook it.

Fred then noticed the secateurs in the old man's hand. He hadn't even realised he was crying till he had to blink away the welled up tears. His sinuses filled with mucus as fear gripped him, making breathing properly harder.

"What are you doing, man?" Fred spat the words out, panic took hold, a desperate anxiety to understand. "WHAT THE FUCK'S GOING ON?" He screamed as he writhed on the table, trying desperately to move his arms or legs.

"I told you, you fucked the wrong dame." The old man looked at him with what could only be described as pity. "Shit, you probably don't even realise it. That girl, she's Eddie Sampson's girl, you heard of him? They call him Big Eddie."

Fred simply stared at him, unable to speak, still falling short of breath as anxiety tore through his mind.

Mac continued, "Well, he's not the kind of guy you want to be pissin' off and you did. In one minute that camera is gonna turn on and the show begins, they can't hear you but they'll see everythin'."

Fred's eyebrows scrunched together as the old man's words sank in. "Who?" he asked.

"Well," replied the old man, after a brief pause, "Big Eddie for one and probably your gal." He spoke with indifference. "I'd say you're the warning, else she'd be lying on a table beside ya, kid. Tough luck." There wasn't a scrap of remorse in his voice. "But I gotta be honest with ya, I'm not a fan of chit-chat, I wish I could trust in you to stay quiet but all I gotta do is keep ya alive and awake, gettin' some nice bucks for ya, kid." A smile crossed his lips as he said it. "Any last words?"

Fred looked at the man, his gaze frozen in fear. Then a 'click' sound could be heard. Fred looked up and saw a blinking red light next to the lens, looking back at the man he pleaded, "Please don't kill me, please!"

"Well, not straight away," Mac replied, "but we gotta fix that talkin' problem first." With this he reached up to Fred's mouth, prying it open with his thick grimy fingers. He then proceeded to grab hold of the young man's

tongue as he tried futilely to scream. Once Mac had a firm grip he yanked Fred's head into better view of the camera above before plunging the secateurs deep into his mouth.

The old man squeezed the handles of the tool together. The muscles in his hand bulged as the blades sliced into the thick muscle of the tongue close to the back of his throat, causing Fred's eyes to roll back into his head as the savage pain hit.

"Almost!" The blades of the secateurs snipped together as the tips met and the old man's hand popped out of Fred's mouth, tongue wiggling in tow.

Fred immediately started roaring gutturally, only stopping to clear his throat of blood. As he lay there moaning and coughing, the old man walked over to the table behind Fred and tossed the limp blood soaked tongue on the table next to the toolbox where it landed with a meaty *thunk* sound.

The old man rummaged through the toolbox again. A clinking sound was heard. He returned to Fred brandishing a small bottle which he unscrewed and then waved under his nose, the smell bringing him back from near unconsciousness.

"Sorry, kid, not yet." The old man replaced the cap of the bottle and tossed it into the toolbox. He picked up his secateurs and stepped down to the end of the table. He reached down and placed his hand on Fred's right shin, gripping the calf muscle, he brought the secateurs up to Fred's ankle and lined up the blade on the rear side of the bone.

Fred sobbed as all this went on and his moans became panicky as he felt the cold blades press against his flesh. He looked up at the camera and tried to scream. The old man loosened his grip to allow the blades of his instrument to come apart before pushing one of the blades an inch or so into Fred's leg, causing the young man's muscles to convulse in a useless attempt to move away.

"Now, you may feel a slight pinch." The old man settled his grip on the leg and with his other hand gave the secateurs a swift push, gliding the blades smoothly up Fred's inside leg, slicing through his calf muscle with minimal resistance.

Fred's head bashed back against the table as the searing burn of torn flesh ripped through his every nerve. The pain of hitting his head seemed to tempt him with some kind of relief to the sharpened blade slicing its way through his body. He continued to slam his head back a few more times



before stopping, unable to even scream anymore he let out a horrible moan mixed with continued crying.

As Mac pulled the blades out from just under Fred's knee, the sound of a phone ringing shrilly demanded attention. The old man let go of Fred, walking off to answer it.

The brief respite when the ringing occurred was of little relief to Fred who could barely stay conscious. Unconsciousness would be a welcome relief to the torment he felt, even death seemed reasonable to him at this point. His body was racked with so much intense pain he couldn't think straight, let alone summon the strength to break free.

Without having said a word, Mac hung up the phone and returned to the table. "Guess it's your lucky day, kid, they're sick of lookin' at ya already." He reached his free hand up to Fred's face. His large calloused fingers gripped Fred's jaw tightly and pointed him towards the camera. "Nothin' personal, kid."

Fred could feel the tip of the blades press against his temple, his eyes rolled round to look at the old man's face but he made no attempt to plead or even cry. He closed his eyelids and welcomed an end to the pain as the blades slowly forced their way in.

## THE SPIRIT LEVEL

*Mathias Jansson*

### *Spirit Level*

The spirit level  
See the bubble in the middle  
Standing still in the spirit level  
Keeping your life in balance  
Chaining you to the scale of death

Move your feet, shift your weight  
A small mistake will tilt the balance  
And in front of your eyes  
The ball starts to roll  
The pendulum swings  
And the hammer cracks the spirit level  
Releasing the bubble of death  
In a cloud of cyanide

## THE MEASURE OF A MADMAN

*Tim Tobin*

### *Tape Measure*

While Anne Wilcox waited to pay for her lingerie, the clerk berated the man dressing the mannequins in the window. When she returned to the counter, the girl pointed to the man, Pete Quinn, with her chin.

“Pervert,” she said. “Gets his jollies from feeling up the dummies, for Christ’s sake.” She bagged Anne’s items and whistled. “Very nice! Looks like your boyfriend is getting lucky tonight!”

Anne blushed a little and smiled to herself. The red teddy with matching garter belt and stockings would blow Tom’s mind.

“And I might even blow Tom,” she thought, feeling a familiar warmth.

Before leaving the store, Anne admired Quinn’s work. One mannequin wore a black teddy, another a black garter belt and stockings. A push up bra and crotchless panties adorned the third. An outfit similar to the one Anne bought lay on a stool next to a fourth white mannequin. A tape measure hanging around the dummy’s neck instilled an unreasonable dread into Anne. Puzzled, she left the store and walked towards her car.

Anne didn’t hear Quinn ask for his lunch break nor did she notice that Pete Quinn followed her out of the shopping mall.

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Anne Wilcox woke suspended from the ceiling. Her feet barely touched the floor and her arms supported the bulk of her weight. The pain brought her situation into sharp focus. She didn’t know where she was but she knew her carjacker intended to rape and probably kill her. After all, she knew his face and name.

She craned her neck to look behind her but could only see the end of a table and what might be a sink. In front of her, a tape measure lying on a small table frightened her to the core. As near as Anne could tell, the room held nothing else.

Anne pulled on the ropes and then kicked and screamed but got no response. Her struggles made the ropes cut into her wrists and a trickle of

blood dripped down each arm.

She lifted her head at the sound of a door opening. Pete Quinn came in, carrying a huge bundle of newspapers. He didn't look at Anne or speak to her. She heard him drop the newspapers on the table and run water from a creaky spigot. She thought she heard a slurping sound and struggled to find the source of the noise but Quinn plunged the room into total darkness when he left.

Anne lost track of time. Hours or days might have passed before Quinn came back; this time carrying what looked like a large vat of glue. Again she heard the running water and slurping sound. Hearing the water, she called Quinn and begged for a drink. Soundlessly he held up a glass of water with a straw. She slurped the water greedily. Then he disappeared behind her.

As Anne hung there in a daze, the notion hit her that the someone behind her had been slurping water too. Someone else might be in the room.

"Hello!" she called. "Is anyone here?"

Silence answered her but Quinn walked in and looked her over.

"Oh, God, here it comes," she thought and steeled herself against an attack. Instead the madman picked up the tape measure and one of her feet. When Anne kicked him, he shackled her feet to the floor. He wrote something in a small notepad and replaced the tape measure on the table. Ann shivered at the sight of the thing. Again he left the room in darkness.

Quinn was struggling with several large bags of flour the next time he entered the room. Anne heard the thump of the bags hitting the table behind her. Her abductor appeared in front of her and picked up the tape measure.

He took a long time measuring her legs, stopping to gently run his hands through her pubic hair. She mustered the energy to scream at him but Quinn simply ignored her.

Anne could no longer feel her hands and her arms ached like an infected tooth. She was nothing more than a body dangling from the ceiling with blood running down her arms from her wrists.

Her torturer returned from time to time and measured every inch of her torso and arms. He took extra time measuring her breasts. Anne lacked the energy to kick at him or even scream.

Quinn rolled a spool of chicken wire into the room, pausing so Anne could see it.

Anne slipped in and out of consciousness, in pain and unable to make sense of his project. In her brief moments of sanity she continued to wonder about his plan for her.

Quinn seemingly rummaged around the table for a while and then turned on the water. The unmistakable sound of scissors cutting paper made her cringe but he worked in silence behind her.

The next sound Quinn made reminded Anne of clothes being hand-washed. She smelled the flour as he apparently added it to the paper and water mush and mixed it in. A familiar odor drifted towards her. A scent from her childhood memory made her brain bounce off her skull.

The monster was making papier maché.

And then Anne figured it out. “The tape measure! He needs my dimensions to know how much to make! He’s going to encase me in papier maché!”

Panic swept over her. She ignored the pain and degradation and fought against her bonds. Screams and curses poured from her mouth. She snorted like a stuck pig, swinging her head on her shoulders, desperately calling to Quinn.

He finally made a sound, like a chuckle, casually strolling in front of Anne wearing a stained apron and carrying a vat of glue.

“Figured it out, did you?” he said. They were the first words she heard from him. He held up the glue. “I have to mix this last ingredient and then cook the stuff a bit. Relax, Anne, it won’t be long now.”

The sink gurgled when he poured the glue into it. Anne tensed when a fire lit with a whoosh. The heat and odor of the cooking mixture made her vomit.

Quinn cleaned off the blood and vomit with a garden hose. Then he rolled the chicken wire in front of Anne. She no longer feared the scissors. She knew the chicken wire would hold the weight of the papier maché.

Quinn used his accursed tape measure to check the length of each piece of chicken wire before he cut. Then he carefully wrapped Anne’s legs and torso in it. The thin wire cut into her body; she whimpered in pain and pleaded with him to stop.

The lunatic just whistled while he wrapped her body.

He pulled over a step ladder and cut the rope holding one arm. Anne’s body spasmed as her left arm supported her entire weight. Quinn ignored her futile attempt to fight with her right one and within moments he

attached it to her torso with the chicken wire. He unshackled her legs and wrapped her ankles and feet in it.

Anne lost all reason when Quinn wrapped her head in the wire.

“Comfortable, dear?” he asked and then laughed out loud. “I hope you enjoy your sexy clothes although I’m afraid that the only color they come in is white.” He laughed again at his own joke.

Anne’s heart beat uncontrollably when he pulled up a huge tub of wet papier maché. He donned rubber gloves and started covering her legs and feet in the plaster-like stuff. The gooey mixture stuck to the chicken wire and shortly her legs and feet were encased.

The bile rising in Anne’s throat burned her esophagus. The added weight pulled her left shoulder from its socket. Somewhere she found the strength to shriek.

“Almost done,” he cackled.

Before starting on her face and head, he shoved two straws up her nose and placed a cork in her mouth. Anne spat the cork out.

He picked up the cork and glared at her.

“Do that again and you’ll never taste another drop of water!” She let him put the cork in her mouth.

Anne was gripped in a full panic attack when he slapped the first handful of papier maché on her face. She sweated uncontrollably; her heart beat wildly and she wet herself.

He covered her face, leaving openings for her eyes, nose and mouth.

Anne hung in agony by one arm until the papier maché dried. When Quinn cut the rope, her encased body fell clumsily to the floor. Quinn pulled her useless left arm down, wrapped it in chicken wire and papier maché.

He stood her heavy encased body against a wall and fastened it with a belt. Now in a standing position, Anne breathed heavily through the straws. Her eyes darted around the room and hell revealed itself.

Three more bodies encased in white papier maché were visible through the eye holes. Suggestive underwear identical to his mannequins decorated each body. One wore a black teddy and another a black garter belt and stockings. Quinn dressed the third in a push up bra and crotchless panties.

He held a glass of water with a straw to Anne’s mouth. He yanked the cork out and she slurped water until she got sick.

With a vicious laugh, he rummaged in a bag and pulled out Anne's teddy, garter belt and stockings, then dressed her plaster tomb in the lingerie.

Anne watched Quinn twirl around, admiring his harem. He slowly did a striptease for them, saving the best for last. Laughing hysterically, he masturbated on each woman.

Spent, he looked Anne in the eyes and she could see his insanity.

"Watch carefully," he taunted, "because you'll never see another thing."

Anne didn't think she could feel any more terror until she watched him cover all the eye holes with papier maché. She knew all three women had to be screaming behind their cases. When he got to Anne, she begged and pleaded and promised him the grossest of sexual favors.

Quinn just slapped some of the mixture into the holes until Anne's case went black.

Anne received an occasional drink of water whilst inside her living tomb. She heard virtually nothing and rarely knew whether Quinn was in the room. She knew she was dying. He gave her water but no food. Her body passed hunger and began to eat itself from within. Her shoulder and arm ached constantly. She retched at the stench of her own blood, urine and vomit.

Panic gave way to utter desperation. Acceptance replaced hope and Anne no longer feared death, so the muffled sounds drifting into her ears surprised her. She heard a low thud followed by other thuds, then pounding and cutting noises.

Anne's emotions soared. "He's cutting us out of these plaster tombs!" She hoped the other two women knew as well.

Her heart raced in excitement and she called to Quinn to hurry. And just as quickly, her desperation and panic returned as wails of agony and shrieks of unbearable pain penetrated the papier maché.

Anne knew then that Quinn was torturing the woman, probably killing her. Her voice joined the chorus of pleas for help.

Twice more Anne heard thuds and agonized voices before Quinn came for her. She sensed his presence and felt him lift her tomb off the floor and onto the table. Anne never stopped talking, begging for mercy, pleading for her life.

Quinn never said a word but Anne could feel him working on her head. Bit by bit light began to burn her eyes. As her eyes adjusted, she focused on the reality around her. Blood covered the walls above the table and when Anne saw the severed arms and legs protruding from the sink, she finally lost her mind.

She felt the agonizing pressure in her brain and knew her eyes were bulging from her face. And then consciousness slipped into merciful blackness.



Shimmering phantoms danced behind Anne's eyes and slowly crystallized into real doctors and nurses. Anne knew she spoke to them but received no response.

She heard about the police rescue that failed to save the other three women but officers got Anne to the hospital in time. She heard them discuss her stroke, her comatose state and bleak prognosis. "But you never know," they whispered.

Anne blinked her eyes as rapidly as she could but no one noticed.

"I'm not in a coma!" she shouted at them but they just ignored her. "Oh my God, please, I'm OK! Please talk to me!"

The silence persisted until Anne understood that a living tomb replaced her papier maché tomb.



With no one to talk to and nothing to do, Anne was bored. Her wounds had healed months earlier so she was in no pain. At first she relived the ordeal in Quinn's room, constantly questioning what she could have done differently. And she always answered herself, "Not much."

Detectives stopped by a few times to ask the doctors if she would ever be able to talk to them. She overheard them telling a nurse about Pete Quinn being committed to a mental institution.

Tom also came by a few times but when Anne's condition didn't change, Tom came less and less and his visits eventually stopped altogether.

So Anne became excited by the sight of three painters. The nurse excused herself and the men went to work on her room. After only a few

minutes, the nurse came running as Anne's shrieked out loud. The nurse found Pete Quinn, with a tape measure draped around his neck, pulling a white sheet over Anne. She learned from police that Quinn had escaped from the mental hospital and disappeared after visiting her. The doctors theorized that the shock of seeing Quinn broke her coma.



Anne tried to resume a normal life but the specter of Pete Quinn and his tape measure were always nearby. Her apartment became a fortress with multiple deadbolts and bars on the window. She even bought a gun and carried it in her purse, not caring that it was illegal.

Still, Anne was surprised when Quinn tried another carjacking.

She left her office after dark, deep in thought about the presentation on her desk and never knew the madman was lurking in the bushes until he was behind her. She clicked her remote just as Pete Quinn grabbed for the keys.

She spun around to confront a monster with a tape measure looped around his neck.

In one brief second Anne recognized her tormentor and hissed, "Not again, you bastard!"

Her key ring flew across the parking lot when she yanked her keys back from Quinn. His punch bounced off of Anne's surgically repaired shoulder and she howled in pain. With her good arm she swung her purse at his head and connected. Her pistol gave the handbag added heft and Quinn toppled backwards to the ground.

Desperate to reach her gun, Anne fumbled with the zipper on the purse. Meanwhile Quinn got to his feet and came at her again, his eyes ablaze with hatred. Anne pulled the gun and tried to point it at Quinn. But he was on her again and shook her wrist until the gun fell to the cement and discharged. Quinn squealed as the bullet entered his thigh. He fell backwards towards Anne's car with the ends of the tape measure flying away from his body.

Panting in exhaustion and fear, Anne's grabbed the ends of the tape measure. The evil thing seemed to burn her hands as she tied the ends to her door handle. In near panic, she found her keys and closed the car door.

Quinn somehow regained his footing and stumbled to the car. He pulled on the locked door and shouted something about a tomb at Anne. She started her car and roared away.

She drove with the dead body of Pete Quinn dangling from the door until a police car finally stopped her.

No charges were filed and Anne removed the deadbolts and bars from her apartment door.

Ironically, Anne married a carpenter but she never allowed his tape measures in their home.

THE EXECUTIONER'S AX

David Frazier

Executioner's Ax

Executioner's ax is heavy
Double edged, very sharp.
Lay your head upon the block
Ready to lop off.

Dressed in my black hood
Raising the ax above my head
Arched my back, extend the swing
The edged tool sings through the air

It hits the mark
Blood splatters everywhere
A sloppy mess
Head rolls into basket

Lips twitch, eyelids open then close
Even though the head was severed
Body flounders on the deck
Like a fish out of water

Spurting liquid, wetness abounds
People cheer, yell for more
I would give it, if I could
Another sinner for the block

Ready for another
Send for holy inquisitor
Not to bless their short life
But to sanctify the executioner's ax

Ask for forgiveness
From God above
You'll get none from me
If I raise this ax, it must come down

This ax has been anointed by blood...

MISTER WHITE

G. K. Murphy

I

Jack Stern is about to lock up the store for the night when a familiar face arrives. A paying customer who never ceases to contribute and add valued finances to the healthy flow and continuation and running of Stern's Hardware shop. But he's a strange one, this fella.

In his head, Jack has taken to mentally referring to the client as Mr White, mainly because he sports a casual white Puffa-jacket each time he visits. He comes at least once a week and pays cash every time. "Good evening, sir," Jack says, "Will it be the usual... a Scorch wood-shave?"

Mr White nods, remains sullen, black stringy hair falling in greasy wisps past his red-tinted circular spectacles. He is devoid of expression as Jack fetches the tool ordered - and White hands the twenty-pound note over the counter. Jack smiles amiably when accepting the money and gives him his 45p change, which the man will now deposit in the Blind box.

This quiet fellow turns and leaves, carrying the grey iron toolbox in his left hand, the wood-shave secured inside. It rattles as he walks.

Jack watches him and suddenly feels afraid.

II

Tonight, a murder will happen, as it has once a week for the last two months. The police and investigating authorities are stumped, at a loss to solve the case as the manhunt uncovers nothing that might lead them to any viable suspect.

III

Jack Stern stops off at the chip shop on his way home, after first clocking in at his local pub to sink a few pints before settling down to enjoy his supper. He will lie on the settee with his feet up as the food teeters on his chest, clicking through the TV channels. He is eventually satisfied with the prospect of watching the news.

The report turns to the inner city circle when they discuss a recent spate of murders occurring during the cold winter nights, apparently carried out on people walking their dogs along the city lanes and backstreets. "Asking for trouble..." Jack mutters, chewing warm juicy sausage.

The TV says the killer bludgeons the victim to death with a heavy-duty instrument, crushing the skull and then slices into their arms and legs with a wood-shave, right down to the tough bone and then further inside into the exposed marrow...gruesome, indeed.

Jack looks at his sausage in the chippie paper-wrapping and grimaces.

"Just the chips for me tonight..."

The reporter describes how the killer seems to only attack and kill dog-walkers.

Suddenly, he is chilled into silence and can speak no more. The murder location's CCTV camera shows a man leaving the scene of the crime wearing a bulky white Puffa-jacket. Jack recognizes the man from his store. It's him, no doubt... and starts him thinking... thinking stupid stuff... but if he reports it to the police, how will it affect his livelihood... his precious business he's spent over a decade building, the way his paying customers perceive him in the local community... Yep, it will bring the wrong sort of attention. He will, he thinks, keep the bloody well hell out of it...

...but people are dying!

IV

It's been a week and Mr White is due in the store. Jack has been dreading it, for he realises he must stop the killing. Stupidly, he wants to be a hero – suddenly - and that might be his folly. In the eyes and hearts of the community, he might transfer as an utter fool but he feels he must do something - and tonight, like last night and the night before; he's prepared for the evil Mr White.

He enters dead on the stroke of five and slowly and deliberately approaches the counter. Jack is trying to control his breathing, trying not to look too nervous and scared. But he is... and it might be the death of him – after all, for God's sake – this is a serial-killer standing before him!

Jack says, "Will it be the usual, sir? Scorch wood-shave?"

The expressionless murderer nods and pushes a twenty-pound note across the counter. His eyes cannot be seen beyond the red-tinted glasses but still Jack tries, and seems momentarily hypnotized, because the eyes of this killer are pools of black. They herald death and the glory of a successful kill.

Jack must act now.

He pulls the pistol from beneath the counter and points it at the face before him. "Hit the deck, I'm calling the police!" he cries, his mouth dry and tingly.

Almost instantaneously there is a sound of sirens signalling a police presence outside Stern's Hardware store and Jack is suddenly bewildered. His gun-hand is starting to quiver and droop. The metallic instrument is heavy... and loaded. He wants to end it right now, pull the trigger, rid this bastard and become a local hero...

Mr White casually places his toolbox on the counter, turns around and heads to a quiet area of the shop. He reaches the far corner when he stops and examines the items hanging from the walls... for the first time, there is an utterance from his lips which resonates. This bastard is laughing... actually laughing...

Jack screeches as the police burst through the door, "Don't laugh at me! I know who you are... murderer!"

Mr White has taken a heavy file from the shelf. He holds it up for Jack to see and speaks to the shopkeeper in a rasping, hissing voice, "Take it out of the twenty... my mommy took my doggie away... I loved my little doggie!" He plunges the file directly upwards through his right eye-socket and deep into his brain. He falls, landing on his face and pushing the metal instrument deeper into the fragile bone.

Jack wants to scream as he witnesses unpredicted horror.

He feels dead inside...

...doesn't know what to say or do...

... He will shut-up shop for a few days, or maybe a few week... doesn't want to be a hero anymore.

Heroes are for Hollywood.

THE WHOLE (TOOL) KIT AND CABOODLE

Handcrafted Flash Fiction

John H. Dromey

Toolbox and tools aplenty

Flip Flop

The Andersons routinely bought rundown old houses for a pittance, quickly fixed them up and then sold the properties, getting a decent return on their sweat equity.

The Barnstable bungalow was different. All attempts at modernization failed. The place was haunted by malevolent spirits who were opposed to change.

Wearing period costumes and using antique tools, the house-flippers eventually managed to restore the old cottage to its original condition and then placed it on the market.

Prospective buyers who attended showings inevitably fled in terror.

The Andersons had found a permanent home, at last—the ghosts wouldn't let them leave.

The Right Tool for the Job

Gavin was expecting an important call. When the phone rang, he picked it up on the first ring and started talking.

“Did you get inside the witch’s workshop?”

“Yes, I...”

“So the hex key worked just as I predicted?”

“Not really; the door was open.”

“You’re there now.”

“No, I’m calling from the emergency room at City Hospital.”

“Let me guess. You were severely scratched by a cat’s paw.”

“No, the witch’s familiar wasn’t there.”

“Her what?”

“Her animal companion.”

“Oh. Actually, I was referring to the traditional Japanese woodworking tool that’s used for pulling nails. Was there a protection spell tied to some other gizmo in the shop? Did the plumber’s snake become animated and coil itself around you?”

“No, but you’re on the right track. My injuries resulted from an attack with a tool that’s named after an animal. Can you guess which one?”

“No,” Gavin said, having run out of guesses. “Tell me what happened.”

“The sorceress was at home. When she saw me she grabbed a monkey wrench and went ape.”

What a Way to Go

Having lingered overly long while feeding on his latest victim, Count Orloff was far, far from home and the sun would soon be rising. There was a cottage nearby, but since he was unable to cross the threshold of an occupied dwelling without an invitation, the count had to settle for a patch of cultivated soil where he covered himself with dirt.

Later that morning, Sean O’Reilly planted potatoes. He used a dibble—a wooden stick with a sharpened end to prepare a hole in the ground for dropping in the seed potatoes.

Count Orloff never knew what hit him.

The Measure of a Woman

Millicent, a retired seamstress, was horrified to discover a mouse had chewed a hole in the corner of her wardrobe. She invited her next-door neighbor Ralph over for tea and explained her predicament to him.

Ralph noticed an open and therefore likely empty aluminum soft drink container was sitting on Millie’s kitchen counter.

“Do you have a toolbox?” he asked.

“Yes, of course. What do you need?”

“Tin snips.”

Millie excused herself and left the room. She returned a short time later with a piece of lacy fabric and two pair of scissors—one large and one small.

“Here’s the tulle. I’ll let *you* do the snipping, though, since I don’t know whether the repair job calls for ten short cuts or ten long ones.”

Dangerous Diet

How does a masochist burn calories?
With a soldering iron.

Under Cover of Brightness

A heavysset man in a grimy trench coat stepped out from behind a dumpster and confronted a slender young woman who was wearing high heels and a business suit.

“You startled me,” she said. “I’ve heard this is a tough neighborhood.”

“Ay, that it is.”

“I sure wouldn’t want to be here alone at night.”

“Nor should you be. It’s a killing field then.”

“R-r-really?”

“Ay.”

“Lucky for me it’s a bright sunny day. Otherwise I’d never have taken this shortcut through the alley.”

She took a couple of quick steps to the side to go around the man, but he mirrored her action.

The man shifted his weight from one foot to the other. She took a step backwards. He took a step forwards.

“I’d prefer to do my stalking after dark,” he said, “but I have no choice in the matter.”

“W-why’s that and w-w-what’s that you’re holding behind your back?”

The man swung the lethal instrument around in front of him and grabbed the handlebar with his free hand. At the same time he squeezed the start button.

He didn’t even have to raise his voice to be heard over the whirring sound.

“It’s a solar-powered chainsaw.”

Color Scheme

“What do you have in your bottom drawer?” an English visitor asked a young woman in the American Midwest.

“What do you mean?”

“What’s in your trousseau? In your hope chest?”

“Don’t have one.”

“Why not? Don’t you hope someday your prince will come, wearing royal purple, or a white knight will show up and sweep you off your feet? Surely you want to be ready.”

“Maybe that will happen, maybe not. I’m prepared either way. I have a tool chest.”

“What good will that do you?”

“I’m betting on a sure thing—*blueprints*. I’ll build my own dream house.”

Pin Oak K.O.

A small bell tinkled above the door when a prospective customer entered Giuseppe’s tiny shop.

“My little nephew wants a pony for his birthday,” the man said. “I need you to make some shoes.”

Giuseppe waved his arm in the direction of his cluttered workbench.

“As you can see, I have mostly gouges and carving knives. I could only make wooden shoes.”

“That’s perfect. Child’s size eleven. My nephew will *love* the sound his clogs make when he rides his broomstick horse across a bare hardwood floor.” The man shrugged his shoulders. “My sister and brother-in-law maybe not so much.”

Taking It on the Chin

“Your face is a mess, Jim; did you cut yourself shaving?”

“You could say that. It happened while I was shaving off small amounts of wood in order to smooth out some old boards. I had to take off my regular glasses to put on some nonprescription safety glasses. That meant I needed to keep my face very close to the work to see what I was doing.”

“I can visualize that scenario with you leaning over the handle of a sharp-edged tool, but it doesn’t explain the cuts.”

“Yes, it does. I was holding the hand plane upside down.”

How Quickly They Fur Get

Although Trevor was reasonably proficient with the use of basic carpentry tools, he had never mastered the finer points of cabinet making.

That was before he was bitten by a werewolf.

Afterwards, whenever Trevor underwent the rapid transformation that turned him into a hairy beast, he felt right at home in the forest, but his woodworking skills were no better than before. Embarrassed by that fact, once a month, Trevor became a lone wolf.

He turned down repeated invitations to run with the local pack.

“Why do you shun our company?” the alpha werewolf asked him.

“I’m not a joiner.”

CATCHING A BREAK

Robert Evangelista

Crowbar, crescent wrench, dead blow sledgehammer, tire iron and rope

I had always dreamt someday of living the life of a writer and, as I cruise along the country road with the top down, feeling the warm air so fresh and clean filling my nostrils, I can't help but feel lucky to be living my dream. As a writer, everything you do is an experience, maybe a story. Observe and report is the order of the day and I do, I spend at least three hours a day writing, even between projects. Write from your own experiences, many people will tell you when you start out and that advice will serve you well long after that I assure you, life sells, well, the interesting bits do.

My name is Ken Panserno. I've been persistent enough to have had a small measure of success with my writing and please understand, persistence was key to breaking in to the scene. When starting out I would submit story after story and when (inevitably) I got rejected I would revise, tweak, whatever I felt it needed and with the adoration for my carefully crafted Frankenstein's monster of a tale reinvigorated, it would spur me to send it on again. Sometimes back to the same people, hell, at least they would get to know my name.

But all the effort was worth it; I had the satisfaction of quitting my day job seven years ago to concentrate on my writing career and began promoting the hell out of myself like a hooker with a neon sign. I was everywhere for a couple of years, e-zines, anthologies, science fiction collections, I would try it all. But I realised after my initial flurry of work that I still received more rejections than acceptances overall, my stories lacked something: realism.

I have no problem admitting I enjoy the odd tale of supernatural horror, something fantastic to put your imagination through its paces and lord knows they can be incredibly fun to write, but a few years back it happened, I had the breakthrough I needed to bring the realism I needed to my stories.

My mind comes back to the present as the road ahead of me begins to curve, winding through some dense bushland. Further ahead is the entrance to my grandfather's property. Although he passed away long ago the land

has stayed with the family, I'm lucky enough to have had it passed on to me and I use it as a getaway to relax or to focus on my writing. There's something about the solitude out here that leaves the mind free to think clearly.

Where was I? Yes, the realism moment. I was robbed at gunpoint, wrong place wrong time, I guess you could say. Don't you hate it when you decide to get gas at one in the morning and the place gets robbed? Really shits on the night, let me tell you. But I digress, I was just a customer, and although I lost my wallet and car, I ended up using that experience to write the story that really gave my career the boost it needed.

Enough of that, though, it's a beautiful day I consciously think to myself as I reach the entrance to the driveway, the start of a journey of almost five minutes to the actual house itself. Its seclusion had always added a mysterious air to how I saw my grandfather but my memories had always been fond ones and driving down the dirt road, taking in the smells surrounding me, aroused my olfactory senses and a smile crosses my face as memories of my childhood flash through my mind; I don't know about happier times but they were definitely simpler.

One of my most successful tales, 'The Beast of Cambridge Park', was written shortly after my grandpa passed away. It was a short story about a young man's emotional struggle with a dark power. I won 3 awards for that story alone that year. It was also when I realised how much empathy could play a factor in writing, the idea that the scariest situations are the ones people face every day. A story written with your own feelings is something others can relate to and ever since that day I have done my best to make my characters as real to the audience as their own siblings.

The gravel drive crunches beneath the weight of the car as I drive, at certain points the dense bushland threatens to invade the clearway and I wonder if the brush is capable of scratching my car as badly as the scraping sound it made would suggest. As I near the large clearing marking my arrival at the house, I notice a small hive on a nearby tree, something to check out later. Nature had always fascinated me, I would spend hours watching documentaries, oblivious of time. I pull up in front of the steps that lead to the veranda and pop the switch beside the seat to release the boot of the car as I make my way out.

As I get out and stand up, I stretch my arms and legs out like a cat upon waking. The drive to the local town is a long one, requiring a gas refill

every two to three trips, it would seem. A shiver trickles through me as I relax my arms and go to the boot where I drag out several bags of shopping and make my way up to the front door. I put the bags down and go back to collect the rest. The screen door is in tatters; something on the to-do list. But the thought leaves quicker than it occurred as I return and prop it open then unlock the front door; the noise of some advertisement on the television is now audible as I collect two handfuls of bags and carry them in.

I walk through the hallway, enter the conjoined living room/dining area on my way to the kitchen and look over at the naked young man sitting tied to the chair in front of the television. His head is craned around to watch me; those eyes raised in that sorrowful look like a puppy that just got a good smack. His mouth is agape with an old shirt gagging him from speech.

“You always look so depressed,” I say to him as I walk through into the kitchen and place the bags on the bench. I go back to the front door to get the rest of the shopping and avoid his gaze as I do this time, work first, fun later.

I shut the front door with my foot and carry the rest of the groceries through. I realise the news is on and the story is about a search for the Berriland Killer, eleven victims, the last one being a week ago. Berriland is a pretty quiet place, I should know, I live there. Till this happened it was the kind of town where everyone knew each other and you could leave your doors unlocked at night. Then a family of five is murdered and no one has a clue who did it.

In a matter of weeks the town underwent a severe personality change, from friendly small town to angry mob at times. Outsiders were treated with suspicion and near hostility for even setting foot in town. As more murders occurred and more details became known, some of the town's more vocal folk started voicing their opinions on who it was. All rumour of course but then someone admitted to having an affair with the wife and all hell broke loose. But the fact was there didn't seem to be a mitigating factor to bring the deaths together, apart from the fact each of them was killed in a similar fashion either by bludgeoning and/or stabbing and in almost all circumstances there was clear evidence of sexual assault, not always before death.

The clearest similarity was in the weapon used, what police suspect to be a crowbar or tire iron; and he didn't spare any man, woman or child in his path. The loathing that had developed over the weeks that his reign of terror was in effect was at boiling point, he would have been lynched in the street had anyone found who it was.

Well, anyone but me, of course. I look at the young man and point at the furious mob burning an effigy on the screen, "You should be happy to be here, mate," I say to him. "Look at what *they* want to do to you."

He looks at me with those eyes again, nervous, he smells of sweat and piss. I'm glad he hasn't shit himself; bathing him was never something I had taken into consideration. I decide to delay putting the groceries away and remove his gag first, I wanted to talk with my new friend.

Rather than untie the knot in the back of his makeshift gag, I merely wedge my fingers behind the cotton shirt with one hand and take a forceful grip of his hair with the other, wrenching the tightly bound gag out of his mouth and over his chin, wouldn't hurt to remind him of who's in control.

He takes some large gulps of air, "Please," he mutters, sounding short of breath, "I need some water."

"Later," I reply. "I want to have a chat with you." I open the top drawer of a nearby dresser and take out a pad and pen. I then go to the dining area and pick up a chair, the same as the one my guest sat tied to. I place it in front of him so we were face to face.

I turn the television off and take the seat, pad and pen at the ready. I sit there with my knees close together, trying to display some non-provoking body language in an attempt to have him open up a bit more easily, well, anything was worth a try. He sits there looking at me, a slight trembling was noticeable.

"What do you want from me?" he asks quietly and sincerely, his voice sounding raspy with dehydration.

"Hmm." It was always possible I had made a mistake of course so I thought I would try the direct approach. "I want to know why you killed all those people." At this point he would either join in or I would have to begin rethinking my need for medication.

My question was met with a brief pause, and then, "I had my reasons."

Needless to say his reply invigorated me, as both evidence I had the right person and also that I might get some good material to work with; the

chance get inside the mind of a killer seemed an invaluable opportunity, I decide to continue with my impromptu questionnaire.

“I noticed you don’t live in the area.” I produced his wallet from my pocket and flipped the leather pouch open to show his driver’s license. “two towns away, why Berriland? Why not your own town,” I looked at his license again, “Jared Taylor?” Upon hearing his name Jared just looked at me, his mouth now crossed with something, maybe anger, frustration perhaps.

“Did you know the family before you killed them?” I continued my questioning, hoping to gain some momentum in conversation. I had started doing my own research after the third murder and found a difference in ferocity from the first killings and the latest ones, “You beat the father to an unrecognizable state, his head completely smashed to pieces. That was personal, wasn’t it?” Having written so many tales of cold blooded murder, it wasn’t a big leap to jump into someone’s shoes, it took another murder before I found the connection that helped me figure out where his next victim would be found.

Jared now looked somewhat afraid but he still wasn’t opening up as I hoped he would. I realized I needed to lubricate his momentum somewhat and, with this notion in mind, I felt it was time for a revision of my tactics; much like writing if you aren’t getting results, a different approach could yield a stronger story, revise and rewrite.

“Excuse me,].” I stood and gave him a pat on the shoulder as I began to walk away, “Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be right back.”

I made my way through the kitchen to the back door, as I opened it a breeze pushed through bringing that fresh air country scent into the stale room. I made my way down the old wooden steps that creaked as I went down into the back yard. I walked across the overgrowth, careful to avoid the herb garden which had grown with violent intent over the winter and made my way to the garage.

The old door creaked as I opened it; I added oiling hinges and fixing the steps to the to-do list, although I couldn’t remember what I had added earlier. Almost immediately I was hit by that musty old smell. I hadn’t been in here for several months at least. My hand fumbled along the wall, brushing through some ancient cobwebs before finding the light switch to turn it on.

With a loud click from the switch the fluoro light slowly flickered its way into life and I wandered over to the starkly populated tool bench. The memory of playing with my grandfather's array of tools long ago and helping him out messing about fixing things, made its current state a sad comparison. I bent over and exhaled a deep breath as strongly as I could over the dusty bench top, sending thick plumes of dirty brown dust particles bouncing off the wall behind them and threatening to engulf my sinuses.

I quickly stepped back, deciding to deal with dust laden tools than suffocate trying to clean anything. I went back to the bench as the cloud settled and shifted the few boxes around that were left, seeing what would be of use.

After a thorough search I found a small assortment of usable items. Most of my grandfather's things had been scavenged by family on his passing, but there was enough to make do; I was born with an ability to utilize just about anything creatively.

I had found a drop cloth on a nearby shelf and unfolded it, placing it on the floor with a tossing motion like spreading a blanket out. Regardless of the plastic sheet I had just laid down, I decided I would rather any mess to occur on the concrete floor of the garage than the plush carpet of the lounge room. I then placed a chair from nearby directly in the centre of the sheet and another across from it.

Happy with my preparations I made my way back to the door, it was then I noticed a sizeable and heavy tool leaning against the doorframe. A large red dead blow sledgehammer stood there bright as day, perhaps the only reason I hadn't noticed it was its proximity to the light switch, my attention was everywhere but the way I had come in.

I continued on back into the house, my mind running with possibilities now for story ideas. Perhaps a whodunit would be worth a try. I always enjoyed a challenge in my storytelling. I made my way to the lounge room where Jared sat. He looked almost pitiable naked and tied to a chair - almost.

"Okay, time to move," I said as I approached, "and yes, I will have to take some precautions."

"What do you mean?" Jared's voice showed signs of his nerves beginning to break completely, really need to move him before he shits himself. Before another word could escape his lips I was behind him and my arms were locked in a vice-like grip around his neck. Before long I felt

his body give up resistance and I let go, letting his head flop down toward his chest.

I placed two fingers on his neck to make sure he had a pulse, after all this, it would be a shame to have the bastard die before I got anything useful out of him. The slow beat of his heart echoed through my fingertips. Satisfied he was alive but unconscious I undid the ropes tying the young killer to the chair. Once done I grabbed him around the waist and threw his limp body over my shoulder. I scooped up the rope and made my way to the garage, hoping to reach it before too much blood pooled in the sleeping man's head.

He seemed heavier than when I first carried him into the house a couple of days prior. I was tempted to toss his body down to the ground and go down the steps outside the kitchen unencumbered but decided against the fleeting desire.

I made my way into the hazily lit room, the recent addition of fresh air stirred various smells to life and a waft of petrol brushed my nostrils. I placed my guest down in the chair and let the rope fall to the ground. I picked it up and, while holding his body still with one hand, I used my other to loop it around his torso and begin retying him for a proper conversation. Which, to be honest, I hadn't figured out yet, but he didn't need to know I was playing it by ear; the positive side is that without a real plan the world is your oyster, as they say.

"There we go," I mutter out loud to no one. I looked at my rope work, giving it a nod of approval. I give his tied hands a tug and their lack of movement and slight reddish tint meant they were not coming loose without assistance of some kind. Hell, I did such a good job I may just cut his hands off and frame the rope work to preserve it as is, I thought, smiling. Okay, time to wake the young man up.

I walk over to the workbench and examine the items I laid out moments ago. Decisions, decisions, I decide to let my childhood friends eenie and meenie decide for now. And the winner is; a crowbar. I pick it up and walk over to Jared and put myself in the chair across from him thinking about the best way to wake him. My mind immediately conjures up a line from one of my stories,

'With a swift strike the beast awoke, the shock quickly turning to anger and anger to attack,'

Whilst I felt it would certainly spark some emotional response from my guest, I doubted he would have the capacity to tear me apart like the wolf in the story.

Not wanting to spend all day deliberating every detail I get up and, with a hefty swing, bring the hardened steel of the crowbar across the side of the young man's face and suddenly we have a very awake Jared Taylor.

He quickly regained his senses but then realising the change of location and the pain shooting across his face, lost them again almost immediately, starting to freak out. "Please!" he cried. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"I want you to tell me why you did it," I said again. "Why did you kill all those people?" A thought occurred to me and a small laugh escaped my lips. Wouldn't it be amusing if he was a fellow writer trying to research?

Jared sobbed. His face bore a large welt on his left cheek. "I... I knew them." His voice was sombre and his dehydrated state made him sound croaky. "The family."

"Ohh, at last," I said. "The plot thickens. Well, go on then."

"Please, I need water," he said again.

"Seriously?" This was taking forever. "Okay okay, hang on." I wandered out of view for a moment. "Tilt your head back, I'm not untying you."

Jared tilted his head back and, with his eyes closed, he opened his parched lips to receive some water; he looked as though he was about to suck on a cow's teat. I pour gasoline into his mouth and after two gulps he began coughing up violently, sputtering and dry retching as I continue pouring the petrol over his head and body then place the nearly empty can lawnmower fuel over near the bench.

Jared is crying now, I walk back and take my seat across from him like I did in the house. Seeing him in this state I felt something stir in me, empathy perhaps as a hostage, I can't say for certain.

"Let me tell you a bit about myself, Jared." I decide if he wasn't ready to speak then I would have him listen. "My name's Ken; I'm a writer of fiction; scary stories and such. As a writer I have a reasonable amount of time at my disposal and living in Berriland I was immediately entranced by the news of a serial killer in the area."

Jared watched and listened as I spoke, he still trembled but his breathing seemed less erratic than it was after his violent awakening. He

continued to make a quiet whimpering sound, fear, I imagine.

I continue my story, "I started collecting everything I could on your crimes, I even got to visit a few of the crime scenes thanks to friends on the force. But it wasn't till I got myself a nice big map of the area and started piecing out the locations of your crimes that I noticed a similarity to a story I had written a few years ago." I was well known in my own town and some of the surrounding areas as a writer, I would often turn up in the local papers.

"I know," Jared stepped in. "I read your work after hearing you lived close by." This made me feel like he might be finally opening up.

This news made me wonder, "Were you trying to get my attention?"

He stayed silent for a moment before answering, "Not really." I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little disappointed when he said no. "It just seemed like a good way to cover my tracks."

What he is referring to is my story 'Terrible Lie', the main character covers up a crime of passion by leading people to believe it's the work of a serial killer. It got some good reviews and was the link that led me to follow my friend here. In it the main character takes revenge on an ex-lover, but being someone that could easily be seen as a suspect he kills a stranger first and several more after to throw police off the trail.

I noticed when I started mapping out the various locations on the map that the murders took place in similar situations to those in my story, the houses of the victims were close enough to the five points of a pentagram. I didn't notice till I placed a marker for the third and fourth murders, a young couple who recently moved to the area. The murderer broke in while they slept and murdered the man in his sleep before taking the woman as a prize, tying her up and violating her before finalising the moment as an effort and perhaps homage to cover what I suspected was a more personal agenda.

"So what did this family do to you?" In my tale a jilted lover takes his revenge on his ex after she has an affair and leaves him, returning to live with her family who also fall victim to the murderous psychopath.

Jared looked at me for a moment before replying, "Are you going to kill me?"

I thought for a moment, "I don't know." I didn't. "I haven't planned this out. I don't abduct serial killers every day; I just have questions for now."

The words churned through Jared's mind and I saw tears slowly begin to roll over his cheeks. My feelings of sympathy had ebbed away at my growing pity towards the man before me and with it I felt my own heart beat growing in pace. I was getting frustrated.

I used to fall victim to panic attacks after I was held at gunpoint long ago, although they slowly eased in severity over time, it was just another in a long list of mental hurdles I had put myself through in the course of my life.

I have to be honest with you Jared," I stood up from my chair and walked over to the tool bench as I spoke, "I hoped our conversation would be a little more, interesting."

I run the back of my hand across the tools, letting my fingernails clack and bump against the metal handles and rubber grips.

"I want you to tell me a story," I said as I picked up a crescent wrench. "I want you to tell me why you killed the family." I turned around and returned to my chair, happy with my choice; I dragged it closer to Jared's before taking my seat again.

"I need you to understand something," I grabbed his chin and looked directly into his eyes, "Your only chance to survive here is to not piss me off." I sat back. "Now talk."

Jared had noticed the wrench upon my return and his gaze became distracted by it in my hands, it proved a useful motivator.

"The Treymans used to live next door to my family," The Treymans were the family he murdered, "but they moved away about four years ago after some shit happened."

I was glad to finally hear my guest opening up and was silently listening, mentally recording the conversation for retrieval later, "What happened?"

"Me and their daughter," he said.

I interjected, "Their daughter and I." I loathed poor English with a passion, pet peeve or whatever you would call it.

Jared swallowed before continuing, "Their daughter and I were having a relationship, well we were just young and had known each other our whole lives. When we were fourteen we tried out sex a few times and she got pregnant."

He paused briefly, "They made her have an abortion." He looked at the ground as he spoke, picturing the events in his head, "but in the end they

banned us from seeing each other, then moved away.”

“That doesn’t sound like a reason to kill someone,” I said.

His eyes returned to meet my own, “That’s not why I did it.”

“Then tell me why.”

Again Jared paused and I found my impatience with the situation growing bit by bit. I placed the wrench on my lap and brought my hands up and used my palms to give my eyes a rub, the smell of tools was all over them and I stopped, worried I would get something in my eyes.

“What are you going to do with me?” Jared asked again. “Please, I won’t tell anyone if you let me go I swear, please,” he pleaded.

I looked into his eyes; again tears welled up and streamed down his cheeks. I shifted forward slightly in the chair and began loosening the crescent wrench head open. Without saying a word I shoved my free hand inside Jared’s mouth, opening it wide and then put the wrench over his front top tooth, using my fingertips to wind the clamps in tightly around it till it stayed of its own volition.

When I was done I sat back in my chair again and took a moment to absorb the image as Jared sat there with a crescent wrench attached to his tooth and hanging out of his gaping mouth.

“Now,” I said, “I want to know what happened and I want you to stop asking me questions.” I took hold of the wrench handle. “I need you to understand you’re in no position to be asking questions.”

Without another word I quickly stood up, placed my free hand upon his head and then, with the other, I tugged the wrench up. With a loud crack it was freed from Jared’s mouth, tooth in tow.

Jared began screaming and blood poured out of his mouth. I looked at the tooth on the end of the wrench. A chunk of gum told me it had not been a smooth break. My heart was pounding, adrenaline rushing through me. I resisted the urge to break my new toy again until I had heard a little more although, being frank, the boy did come across much simpler than I had hoped, certainly no mastermind.

But perhaps that was where I was wrong; a thought just occurred to me that perhaps he was using my stories and the hometown link to make me a suspect instead. My brain overflowed with thoughts and I sat down to try and get more from my friend.

Jared was sobbing. I slapped his face, “Hey!” I yell, “I’m not fucking around anymore okay, you need to start talking.” His eyes bulged with fear.

“Now tell me why you killed them.”

Jared spat blood, it landed on his chest. His breathing was heavier; fear truly had him. “I loved her,” the words were forced out. “We would still see each other but she didn’t want to have sex anymore.” He took a large gulp of presumably blood and looked at me as he told the story. “About two years ago at a party we got drunk, she passed out and I fucked her, she got pregnant again.”

“Fell pregnant,” I corrected.

“What?”

“Never mind.” My interruptions would only serve to confuse it would seem. “Keep going.”

“She got another abortion and said she didn’t want to see me again. Her dad came to our house and threatened our family if I ever went near her.” He sounded almost sad as he spoke. “Then about eight months ago I found out she kept the baby.”

I wanted to ask more questions but he seemed to be talking now so I decided to let him continue unabated.

“I was drinking one night; I was in a bad place. I was supposed to be on medication but I couldn’t afford it. Anyway, I drove to their place and the back door was open so I just walked straight in.” Jared shifted as best he could in his seat before continuing. “I came into the kitchen and picked up a mallet that was sitting on the bench; I could hear the TV on and headed over.

“It was Mr Treyman, he had fallen asleep in front of the TV.” His voice grew distant as he relived the moment. “I didn’t even think, I just walked up to him and started bringing the mallet down on his head over and over till instead of hearing his skull cracking I heard a wet thud and I knew I’d smashed his brains in.”

Jared stopped for a moment; we both took a moment to let it sink in. I couldn’t help think this was somehow therapeutic for him; there couldn’t be many people he could open up to like this. The idea made me consider letting him go, let him continue his spree and learn more from him as he grew. But, the problem is that he isn’t a true killer, he just had a bad day without his meds and now he’s digging a bigger hole trying to get out.

“You killed a baby that night.” Even if he made a mistake, there are some things you can’t take back. “Was that your kid?”

Jared paused, a grimace crossed his face. "Yes, but you don't understand."

"You killed your own child, what's there to understand?" I had no pity for such actions. "Even monsters protect their young, what does that make you?"

I stood up and slowly paced the room to stretch my legs. "So why the rest? Did you know them as well?"

"No," Jared replied sombrely. "I just got worried they were gonna come after me so I thought I'd make them look somewhere else."

Curiosity got the better of me. "Were you trying to set me up?"

Jared's silence at my question became more unsettling than I would have realized. I found a slow rage building with every second that passed until he spoke.

"I remembered your story, I'd read it a few years ago." Jared's unmuted voice could prove more unsettling than his silence, "I just didn't want them to come after me."

I found an odd feeling coming over me as the realization I had unwittingly been linked to the murders in my own town crept into my mind. I wondered how long it would take the local police to find the similarities and come knocking on my door. Of course I was innocent of the murders themselves but if someone were to come here I could have a problem explaining the beaten serial killer in my garage with a weapon similar to that used in the crimes.

I sat back in the chair, mulling over my next move. I stared at Jared without speaking, he looked back at me, crying again and still shaking. I realized I probably did not have as much time as I had hoped but had squeezed as much blood from this stone as I could so perhaps it was time to clean up.

I walked off toward the door. Even disposing of a body was a risky link to all that had happened but there was no easy way of getting him off the property again, there were too many police patrols at the moment. I could feel paranoia trying to take hold as my mind raced with possible outcomes.

I walked around the side of the house; dusk was beginning to come as the sun slowly dipped beyond the treetops in the horizon. I had some petrol in the boot of the car for emergencies, this felt like an emergency. I looked

out into the dense bushland as I walked. I could bury the body out there tonight without too much suspicion. .

I opened the boot of the car and my panic eased slightly as I saw the two full fuel containers. I took one out. As I closed the boot I saw a car coming through the trees and through the clearing from the driveway, a police car.

I walked around my car to try and meet them. If Jared made a noise they might want to investigate. My mind was racing with every survival instinct I had ever seen or read. As they got closer I saw it was a Berriland car, not one of the local police, at which point I recognised Captain Gary Meriton, an old friend, alone in the car.

Gary stopped the car and parked, then stepping out with a large smile on his face.

“You look like a drunk I used to know,” I said, trying to not to let show I was shitting my pants with terror.

Gary began laughing, a good sign. “Ken, you son of a bitch, I should throw you in prison just for what you know about me.”

We both laughed and met in front of the vehicle for a brief manly hug.

“Woah,” Gary backed up, pushing me away. “You stink, working on something?”

“Yeah, tinkering around in the garage.” I had to get rid of him. “About to hit the shower actually.”

“What are you setting fire to?” Gary pointed over to the fuel sitting on the ground by the car and I wondered if I would have to start working out how to make the Captain disappear.

“Just some old waste and shit.” Had to get him out of here. “What brings you here, Gary?”

“Well, Ken, this is a bit strange for me to say but someone came up with your name as a suspect in the killings,” he said it matter-of-factly. I hoped he didn’t believe it. “Sounds crazy I know but some egghead reckons there’s a connection so I gotta bring you in for an interview. Do you think you could provide an alibi for the dates of the killings? Were you with anyone?”

“Actually, Gary,” and I felt calmer knowing I was speaking the truth, “I was in the UK when the first killings took place and then in another state for one of the others. I can bring you my travel documents but they’re all back home.”

“That’s excellent.” He sounded genuinely relieved. “I hate to ask but if you could bring them in I doubt we would keep you long. I knew it was bullshit but I have a job to do, I hope you understand.”

“Of course, Gary.” I raised my hands in the air. “Am I free to have a shower?”

Gary laughed and made his way back to the car, “Please do, Christ, have two.”

We both shared a laugh and I started walking back to my own car when I realised Gary had stepped out of his car again.

“Ken,” he called. “Just come by the station tomorrow buddy, it’s getting late.”

“Thanks, bud,” I waved after him, and just as I did so Jared started yelling from inside the garage. “I’ll see you then, drive safely,” I called out to Gary, trying to muffle out the sounds of attention seeking screaming coming from inside.

Gary showed no sign of acknowledgement to Jared’s cries for attention as he bowed his head back into the driver’s seat and started up the police cruiser. He simply smiled and waved as he navigated the car around and back up the driveway and I stood there waving him on to the sound of Jared’s screams getting louder in the air behind me.

I casually turned around and made my way back around the side of the house with the fuel in tow. Once I had reached a reasonable distance my rage boiled over and, looking around, I could see patches of the police car’s colours through the trees as it continued to drive away.

Once I felt it was safely out of view I dropped the container on the ground and stormed into the garage, walking over to Jared who was still crying out for help and bringing my knee up to my chest before slamming my foot into the side of his head as I reached him. My kick sent his body flying over and slamming against the concrete surface, his blood pooling on the plastic drop cloth.

I screamed at him: “I’M NOT TAKING THE FALL FOR YOU!” And in a blur of anger I walked over to the doorway and picked up the deadblow sledge. It seemed to bear no weight as I walked back over and heaved it up above my head.

“Please,” Jared muttered, “I think my neck’s broken.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much.” I brought the sledge down fiercely upon the side of his head then lifted the sledge and brought it down

again. This time I could feel something, blood or brain matter, hit the side of my leg through my pants.

I stopped and let go of my weapon and stood a moment, just catching my breath. The smell of blood was thick in the air, joined by what I can only presume is what brain smells like. Moments later I smelt faeces, well, had to happen sometime; at least it wasn't me.

I walked out of the garage and back up the stairs into the kitchen. I made my way through to the bathroom and washed my hands and arms thoroughly in the sink before I made a cup of tea to help settle my thoughts.

I walked out to the garage again and sat in the chair with my tea looking down at the body before me. The blood was in a large pool now below his head and the light gave a perfect reflection of the cobweb ridden ceiling in a crimson hue.

When I finished my tea I put it on the bench and went to the corners of the drop cloth, bringing them together to drag the body out like some morbid stork delivering the dead.

Forty feet from the garage was a furnace my grandfather built, although it hadn't been used in years it should suffice well for my needs. I could bury whatever remained tomorrow, night was falling fast. It dawned on me how easily Jared's body fit into the furnace and I wondered whether my grandfather has used it for more than firewood; I wondered if I would find an excess of teeth in among Jared's ashes.

I retrieved the gasoline and hastily threw some chunks of wood into the pit before pouring half the container over the body. I lit him up and as the flames roared up I could smell burning flesh. I collected more wood and kindling, throwing them in before taking off my blood stained clothes and tossing them into the fire as well.

I went back into the house and put the kettle on again while I had a shower and donned clean clothes. Afterwards I spent a few more hours out by the furnace tending the fire with more wood and petrol, I didn't want anything left. I kept the notepad nearby and made coded notes on some of the more interesting moments of the evening, hoping I could perhaps salvage something to work with.

I switched from tea to beer and by eleven thirty I found myself getting drowsy from the alcohol and smoke fumes. The craving for bacon had sent me inside thirty minutes earlier to make a late snack and now it would seem I was ready to retire.

I took a last look inside the furnace; a pile of ashes was burning away on the bottom, nothing distinguishable as a person, not without closer inspection, at least.

I got up to go back inside; the air was warm despite the fire. I looked up at the sky and could see that clear beautiful star mural up there. I closed the back door and placed the notepad and pen on the kitchen bench as I walked through. I went to my bed and, after kicking off my shoes I collapsed onto it, crushing the pillow against my head, absorbing its softness.

As I drifted off to sleep, the rum having dampened my earlier worries, I thought about how lucky it was I was away during the time the murders took place. The life of a writer can be just that sometimes, lucky. Eventually, you have to be in the right place at the right time, you just have to keep trying.

TWIST DRILL

Stuart Holland

Twist Drill

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The gate at the side of her cottage had broken loose in the wind and was slamming against the latch at regular intervals. Dr. Miriam Halsworthy could hear the infernal noise as she lay in bed listening to the wind howling around her cottage that sat alone near the top of the hill. On the drive next to the cottage, her almost new 4 wheel drive Land Rover sounded its horn as the wind shook the vehicle and triggered the anti-theft device.

“Damn!” she muttered to herself as she rose from the bed and put on her dressing gown and slippers. In a moment she was down the stairs and unlocking the front door. She pointed the car key at the vehicle and pressed the button once. The alarm died as quickly as it had started. A second press of the button made the flashers signal twice, indicating the car was now locked and secured again.

Miriam was about to shut the door when, in the weak moonlight, she thought she saw something move in the field opposite her cottage but it was gone before she could be sure. *Probably just something being thrown around in the wind*, she thought as she locked the door and climbed back up the stairs.

“Damn!” she said a minute later as the gate banged against the latch again and again. The wind died down for a minute and the gate fell silent. Miriam rolled over in her bed and closed her eyes.

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The car alarm was sounding again. At first the noise was fuzzy, but as she came out of her slumber, it grew louder and clearer. The loudness didn’t register as once again she donned dressing gown and slippers and descended the stairs. Mechanically she unlocked the front door and opened it enough to reach out an arm holding the key. Just as she pressed the button and the alarm died, she felt something grab her. It yanked her so hard that

her body slammed into the partially open door, forcing it to close around her upper arm.

“Yearrgghh!” Miriam howled as the pain shot through her where she had been sandwiched between door and frame. Before she could recover, her arm was freed and the door was pushed open, knocking her off her feet. The door caught her forehead, and even before she had fallen to the floor, the cut had started to bleed.

“Whaaaa...!” she cried out instinctively, though she knew no one could hear her. She lay sprawled on the floor, feeling the blood trickling into her left eye. She looked up fearfully, desperate to catch a glimpse of her attacker, but the doorway was empty and the door was wide open.

Miriam started to get back onto her feet. There was blood on the wood floor, she could see that, and her head was throbbing. She could feel the thick, dark red blood dribbling from her forehead and down her cheek. She needed a mirror to see just how bad it was, but the bump was making her feel sick and dizzy. She took her eye off the doorway, turning to look for the telephone on a nearby table.

A moment later she crumpled back onto the floor, her world disappearing into the darkness of unconsciousness as something hard and blunt slammed into the back of her head.

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Very slowly, Miriam started to regain consciousness. Her head was a throbbing mass of bruises. Her forehead was pulsating with the bang on the head she had received as the door had been pushed open but that was nothing compared to the dull ache at the back of her skull.

Painfully, Miriam became aware of her surroundings. She was no longer in the hallway, she was in her dining room sitting on one of her dining chairs. It was a carver style; arm rests to either side of the seat.

Miriam realised she was tied to the chair. Her arms were bound fast to the arm rests and her legs were roped to the front legs. A length of rope had been tied around her waist. Miriam was looking at the ceiling. It was uncomfortable to have her neck craned so far back, but when she tried to lower her head she couldn't manage it. Her long black hair had been tied, then secured to the back of the chair somehow. If she so much as tried to

move her head by a fraction of an inch her hair pulled, making her cry out with pain.

“Who are you, what do you want?” she cried out in the hope her attacker would say something so she might recognise the voice.

Nothing! Miriam knew that he, or she, was there in the room with her because she could hear breathing just behind her head. It was slow, menacing breathing.

“Please don’t hurt me. Tell me what you want,” Miriam pleaded.

“I want you.” The voice was deep, male, which made her predicament even more frightening. Miriam Halsworthy was forty two years old, a divorcee with no children. After the divorce she’d moved to the country, away from the town life she had so hated but her husband had insisted on for the ten years of their marriage. She’d only been living in the cottage for six months and was the newest partner at the practice in the nearby village. Apart from her patients she knew very few people in the village, barely knew her neighbours. It suited her for Miriam was a very private person.

“What do you mean?” she stuttered, hoping her attacker would strike up a conversation.

“I want you,” the voice said again. Not a local dialect, Miriam figured, though she could be wrong as her head was one big throbbing mass.

“I don’t understand.” Miriam thought she did but if her first guess was right then she couldn’t work out why she’d been tied up in the chair. It didn’t make sense.

“You will.”

“Please, I’ll give you anything, just leave me alone.” Miriam was struggling to stay conscious and struggling to stay calm enough to not give away her abject fear at her predicament.

“I have what I want,” said the voice menacingly.

“You do?” Miriam coughed as she spoke.

“Yes. I have you.”

The voice spoke from just behind her ear and Miriam could sense movement. She tried to twist her head to see what was happening but her hair stopped her.

“The only way you will move is if you rip out your hair,” said the voice. Something appeared a few inches above her head. “You know what this is?”

For a moment Miriam froze, trying to focus on the object. She wondered why the attacker would not now be worried about talking to her. After all, she might recognise his voice in the future, if she listened hard enough. Then her eyes focused on what she was being shown and Miriam recognised it. Her father had owned one once. The hand drill, or twist drill, looked old. The wooden handle had once been painted bright red, but the paint had long ago flaked away, leaving only a trace of red, or was that paint? The drill in the chuck looked to be a wood drill and was probably one eighth of an inch in diameter.

“It’s a twist drill,” said Miriam slowly. Suddenly her mouth was dry, so dry she could barely speak the words.

“Exactly. And soon we are going to see what it can be used for. Maybe I could use it to gouge out one of your eyes. I can imagine the soft squelch of your eyeball as it ruptures under the drill while I slowly grind it into the eye socket. Maybe, though, I will drill out your ears. I can imagine the sound of the drill as it ruptures your eardrum will be excruciating to listen to, if not as painful as the drill mashing up the bones in your inner ear. Or maybe, I could drill out your nostrils, one by one, until the septum is destroyed. What do you think, Miriam?”

If Miriam had been petrified before, the way he almost spat out her name with the menace in her voice, half-scared her to death.

He knows me! The realisation that this was no random attack left Miriam stunned.

“I, I, I don’t know. Why are you doing this?”

“For the best of reasons. For the same reason as most people who are assaulted in this way – revenge.”

In a second, the twist drill disappeared from view, Miriam sensed the attacker move away from her and then the light was switched off, leaving her bound as she was, staring into darkness.

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Miriam could feel the perspiration of fear on her chest, face and arms. Unable to move in the darkness she listened intently for sounds around the house. She could hear the garden gate banging in the wind and then the sound of something or someone moving around upstairs. After a minute the



staircase creaked under the weight of the intruder, the door to the dining room opened and a shaft of light penetrated her dark world.

“It’s time,” the voice said menacingly, just behind her left ear. Then she felt something cold pressing against her larynx. Suddenly the awful truth hit her. She heard the mechanical sound of the drill being manually turned just as the cold object started to turn. Almost instantly she felt the pain as the head of the drill pierced her flesh and ground its way quickly into her larynx. She screamed with pain and terror at first but as the drill continued its course into her neck the sounds became muted as her vocal cords were mashed to destruction. As soon as her cries had faded into the darkness the drill stopped. She could feel the blood pouring out of the wound and down her neck and though she tried to scream there was no sound. There never would be again.

“That should keep you quiet,” said the firm but soft voice. “Next we will make sure you only breathe through your mouth.”

Miriam felt the cold, sticky object enter her left nostril. Again the sound of the drill being turned filled the room and fresh, searing pain flooded her head as the septum and nostril were destroyed by the drill. She struggled desperately to free herself but all she achieved was fresh pain as some of her hair was ripped out at the roots.

“Now, we will see what your teeth are like these days. For sure, they won’t look so good in a few minutes.” There was a mocking sound to his voice now, but Miriam was in too much pain to register the tone.

She felt a strip of cloth being wrapped round her jaw and over the top of the head, so when the two ends were tied tightly above her forehead her mouth was jammed shut, her teeth clenched together.

She felt the hand on her lips, prising them apart until the person could insert the tip of the drill almost against her front teeth. Then, just before the drill touched her expensive veneers, Miriam vaguely registered the sound of the manual turning of the drill. Almost instantly the drill smashed its way into her front teeth, shredding them, causing more intense pain. Miriam lost consciousness at the precise moment she wished the person would just kill her and get it over with quickly.

Slowly, as the pain subsided a little, Miriam came round, just enough to one against the full horror of the mutilation taking place. She could feel blood all over her face and onto her body, from her nostrils, her broken

larynx and from her right ear which she knew had been destroyed while she was unconscious.

‘Please just kill me,’ she said though it was no more than a thought as she could make no sounds. She opened her eyes and blinked with abject terror. The twist drill was positioned directly over her left eye and the drill bit was turning slowly. Even as she looked, the drill came lower and lower until she knew the moment had arrived when it would blind her in that eye.

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Miriam became aware of the sound of sirens and the blue flashing lights outside. Slowly, groggily she came back to consciousness. As she did so she realised she was in her own bed, lying on a sheet drenched in perspiration. She was breathing heavily and when she cried out with relief, she could hear her voice. She touched her neck where her larynx was and as she felt it was unharmed, she realised it had all been a horrible nightmare. It was, she vowed, the last time she drank a glass of red wine with her sleeping pill. The sirens had faded but blue lights outside were still flashing so Miriam rolled out of bed and pulled the curtains to one side. A car, it had to be a police car because of the blue lights, stood at the end of her driveway, its lights warning any cars on the road to stay clear. The night was still dark, it was not yet four in the morning. A woman in a dark suit and skirt combination was almost at the front door so Miriam quickly put on her dressing gown, turned on the landing light, and started to descend the staircase. The doorbell rang before she was halfway down the stairs.

Quickly but carefully, Miriam unlocked the front door and opened it enough to see who was standing just outside.

“Dr. Halsworthy?” The female voice was firm and Miriam thought she detected a sense of fear.

“Yes.”

“Can I come in for a moment?” The woman showed her identity card and waited to be allowed onto the premises. Miriam read the card quickly, registering the words Detective Inspector, and opened the door fully.

“Sure, what’s this all about?” Miriam sounded worried, but not as scared as she had been in her dream.

“There’s been an incident at Bradley’s Farm just up the road. We had a call at the local station saying all hell was breaking loose and the first car

on the scene found three bodies up there, just half an hour ago. They've all been murdered, or so it seems. While SOCO are dealing with that, we're part of the team going round the local houses to make sure everyone is okay and to see if anyone has seen or heard anything. You are okay ma'am, aren't you? Only you look like you've seen a ghost or something."

"Oh, a bad dream. I've been on a moderate prescription drug to help me sleep ever since my divorce and stupidly I took it after a glass of wine last night. It gave me a bad dream, that's all."

"And so you haven't seen or heard anything unusual?"

"I'm sorry, I was out cold until your blue lights woke me up."

"Okay, do you mind if I just take a look around?"

"Be my guest."

The officer, whose name Miriam couldn't remember from the ID card, went upstairs for a few minutes, presumably checking the various rooms. When she came back down she quickly checked the ground floor.

"No signs of entry, all windows locked," she said as she left the living room. "How do I get into the back garden?"

"Through the kitchen door. There's a light switch to the left of the door which will light up most of the garden. While you're out there, could you do me a favour and bolt the side gate back in place? I forgot to do it last night and it was banging about a bit in the wind."

"Won't be a minute," said the officer as she flicked the switch, bathing the back garden in light. The back door was soon open and she disappeared outside. She was gone for a couple of minutes and when she returned she confirmed she had bolted the side gate. As the two women went back into the hallway the officer spoke again.

"Nothing to see out there. He probably went in the other direction anyway, but it was worth a look seeing as you are one of the nearest properties to the farm. We'll have a helicopter in the air in about ten minutes to help with the search. That will pick up any heat sources, so I suggest you stay indoors and keep everything locked."

"Will do. I have absolutely no intention of going anywhere before breakfast."

"Well, in that case I'll be on my way to the next house. If you hear anything please give us a call. We know this person is on foot as his vehicle is still at the farm. He can't get too far too quickly at this time of night."

Miriam followed the officer out of the kitchen and watched for a moment as she walked back up the driveway. Then Miriam closed the front door and bolted it.

“She’s on her own,” the woman said softly as she opened the door to the car.

“Good, and the back door and gate?”

“I left both gate and door as you wanted it.”

“Excellent. Now, drive off down the road without the flashers on and park in the layby we passed. I’ll only be ten minutes or so.”

The driver’s door was opened and the driver got out, leaving the woman to take her position in the driver’s seat.

Miriam heard the car pull away as she started climbing the staircase. Although the thought of a killer on the loose was frightening, knowing there must be several police vehicles and personnel in the immediate vicinity was reassuring. Her windows and external doors had been passed by the insurance company less than six months ago, so she knew she was as safe as she could be.

Ten seconds passed.

She could still hear the wind whistling round the cottage outside as she almost reached the top of the staircase and her right foot had just landed on the very top stair when the car alarm sounded again.

“Blast it! I’ll have to get that seen to tomorrow. It’s far too sensitive for these weather conditions,” Miriam said out loud as she turned and went back down the stairs. It took a few seconds to unlock the front door and open it, point the key at the car and switch off the alarm. It took a few seconds more to close the door and lock it again. Miriam turned to climb the stairs and froze with fear.

Standing in the middle of the kitchen doorway was a tall, powerful looking person that had to be a man, from the physique. He was dressed all in black and wore a black balaclava. Miriam made to cry out but the person stepped forward quickly, grabbed her arm with one strong hand and spun her round before the other hand reached round and covered her mouth with a pad of soft material. Miriam struggled, to no avail. She tried to kick out but her assailant was ready for her and stood out of her reach. Then Miriam tried to take a breath of air. As she did so, her world began to spin. Almost immediately she descended into a world of chloroform induced

unconsciousness, her body slumping to the hallway floor as her assailant released his grip on her.

The assailant worked quickly, running up the staircase to her bedroom. He found the jewellery box and opened it, taking out the dozen or so expensive-looking rings and necklaces he had come for. He rummaged in her handbag and found her cheque book. He recognised the name and branch and smiled under the balaclava. Satisfied, he put the cheque book in a pocket and the jewellery in the small black bag he was carrying, before going back downstairs. He left the bag on the floor and picked up the unconscious woman, carrying her easily to the dining room. He kicked the legs of one of the carver chairs until it faced the middle of the room and then deposited her deadweight on the seat. With her slumped on the seat with her neck leaning backwards, the assailant fetched his bag from the hall.

He found the roll of red tape and proceeded to tie Miriam to the chair so one arm was secured to each of the arms and her legs were bound to the front legs of the chair. Then, he grabbed her hair and tied the red tape round the bunch he had grabbed before pulling back and down to secure the other end of the length of tape to the lower back of the carver.

A final length of tape was used to secure Miriam's ribcage just below her chest to the back of the carver. Satisfied she couldn't escape, the man went to the kitchen and found a tumbler which he filled with cold water from the tap. Then he returned to Miriam and emptied the contents over her upturned face. The shock of the cold liquid made her regain a semblance of consciousness and immediately she began to struggle.

"I wouldn't do that," he hissed from behind the balaclava. "First you cannot escape and second you could seriously damage your hairstyle."

"Who... who are you? What... what do you want?" Miriam's eyes were suddenly very wide open indeed and she found she was looking directly up at the ceiling. Her assailant was behind her somewhere, out of sight.

"Who I am is not important. What I want is very important. What you are going to do is write me a cheque for twenty five thousand pounds."

The voice sounded peculiar. Miriam guessed she had been chloroformed so it could have been the effects of that on her brain. She had no way of knowing the balaclava had a voice changer built into it.

"I don't have that kind of money," said Miriam, totally terrified now and barely able to think.

“Yes you do, I know you do. I know everything about you.”

“And what if I won’t sign the cheque?”

“Then I will hurt you. Now, you can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Miriam heard a low whirring sound, something she wished she could remember, but the effects of the chloroform and the sleeping pill and everything else stopped her from doing so. The slow whirring sound got a little louder and then the object came into view, just above her head.

“Oh God, no!” Miriam screamed at the sight of the implement. After her nightmare earlier she now knew exactly what it was and what pain it could inflict only this time, unless she was dreaming again, it was going to be very real pain. “I’ll sign.”

“Good, I thought you would. Now I’m going to release your right hand so you can do what you have to. Any silly nonsense and I’ll hurt you.”

“I won’t, I promise.” Miriam was shaking as she felt the tape round her lower right arm being removed. Then her hair was released and she could look forward. The cheque book was sat on a table mat, one of the solid pine table mats that had been on the dining table. A ballpoint pen was offered to her and in seconds, knowing she had no choice, Miriam signed the cheque.

“Excellent. Now that wasn’t so hard was it?” The peculiar voice sounded as if it was mocking her.

“You’ll never get away with it. I’ll call the police as soon as you’ve gone. They’re in the area anyway and they’ll catch you before you get a mile away.”

“Really, how fascinating.”

“And even if they don’t, I’ll have the cheque stopped first thing in the morning as soon as my bank opens. You won’t get any money when you try to cash it or pay it into your account.”

“Oh, cash is much more preferable. There is one little thing you have overlooked.”

“Is there?”

“Of course, Miriam.”

He knew her name!

“You’re assuming you are going to be able to call your bank tomorrow and call the police. Now, what if you can’t do either?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if no one missed you for several days, or even a week? How would that change things, Miriam?” He almost hissed her name with contempt.

“A lot, I guess. But you won’t get away with it. You’ll get caught sooner or later.”

“Really. Now, before I tell you why I won’t get caught, tell me one thing, Miriam. Which is a quicker death, a hole through the forehead that goes a couple of inches into the brain, or a hole in the chest that goes right into the heart?”

“I really have no idea. I imagine the heart would be quicker. The brain could take a long while to bleed enough for the person to die, but it would depend on the size of the hole.”

“I’m thinking of one that is about four millimetres in diameter, say one created by a twist drill,” the assailant hissed, holding up the same implement Miriam had seen a few minutes earlier.

“Oh God, no, you can’t... oh NO!” Miriam screamed loudly in the hope someone outside might hear her, but at four o’clock in the morning there was no one around.

She felt her arm being taped back to the carver chair as the assailant took the cheque and satisfied himself the signature was her usual one. He tore the cheque out of the book and pocketed it carefully in his black jumpsuit.

“That will repay me for the legal costs you landed me with in our divorce, bitch,” he hissed.

“John?” Her voice was suddenly alert though filled with real terror as she suddenly knew who her assailant was. Before she could talk again, her head was pulled backwards so she was once again looking up at the ceiling, her hair was secured at the back of the carver so she could not move and then a napkin from the table was stuffed into her mouth, making it impossible for her to speak or cry out.

“Back in a moment,” her assailant hissed and disappeared for a minute to put her cheque book back in her handbag. When he returned he had the twist drill held in his left hand and his right hand was on the wheel that was wound round and round to turn the drill bit.

“Now, it’s time to get this over with. Just as a final note, I am not going to get caught for the simple reason I died three months ago in a boating accident, or rather my twin brother, Mark, died but he was carrying

my ID at the time. So, no one is going to come looking for me and anyway, by the time you are found, bitch, I will be long gone with the cheque cashed.”

Miriam’s eyes were wide open but she screwed them closed as soon as she saw the head of the drill slowly descending towards her forehead, just above her eye line. Then she felt the searing pain as the drill bit into her skull and her world went dark as the drill continued deep into her brain tissue.

He removed the drill and stepped back to avoid contaminating himself with her fluids. Then he walked round to her front, opened her dressing gown and positioned the drill between two ribs, just where her heart was beating. A few turns of the mechanism and the beating stopped. He took care to clean the drill bit on her gown as he removed it.

Satisfied his work was done, the assailant packed his bag and left the same way he had come, setting the back door to lock automatically behind him. The dining room faced the back garden and, with its curtains closed, Miriam could remain undetected for days.

In seconds he was through the garden gate and heading up the road to where the car was waiting for him. Something didn’t seem quite right. He couldn’t see the woman in the driver’s seat as she was supposed to be. Suddenly he heard a car approaching from behind him, the engine soft, the car moving slowly.

“John Halsworthy,” a voice boomed from the shadows. “Stay where you are, armed police!”

CUT THROAT

John L. Thompson

*Hand ax, logging saw, maul, propane torch and the notorious
Srbosjek or 'Serb Cutter'*

"A most atrocious form of genocide was committed at Jasenovac, as hundreds of thousands of innocent elderly, women and children died there just because they belonged to a different creed or different ethnic groups... we are calling on the Balkan nations to break the vicious circle, which turns today's victims into tomorrow's hangmen and transforms today's hatred into tomorrow's revenge."

Dragan Cavic, President, Republic of Serbs, 2005

SEPTEMBER 1943

Jasenovac was literal interpretations of Dante's Hell come to life as a blistering, pus-filled sore on the earth's ass, or so Vukasin Novkovic thought. He and his wife Dianne had been ordered here for the alleged crime of posting Communist leaflets throughout the city of Sisak, which was a total distortion of facts. They had been arrested and never saw a judge on the matter but had been ordered straight to the work camp. They were packed in the back of a truck with twenty other prisoners whose fate was similar. He leaned back, peered through a small tear in the tarp covering and saw the large sprawling compound of cluttered buildings and snorted.

When the Nazi war machine stormed the Baltic States, they were quick to recognize excellent talents for ruling their conquered territories. Ante Pavelic was chosen for the position by Hitler personally and had come out of exile in Italy to his homeland of Yugoslavia to obtain control of the government. Through a series of sweeping reforms, one of his first orders of business was to purge the lands free of Serbs. His newly formed Ustaše militia quickly began rounding up the Serbs and transporting most of them to Jasenovac. His orders were carried out to the letter. Mass genocide had occurred at such a blistering pace as to appall even their Nazi allies.

The lorry jerked to a halt and shook him from his thoughts. The driver cursed and stepped out onto the running boards screaming lines of

profanities at the gate guards to open the gates. “*Dobiti karanje vrata!*”

One of the gate guards peered through the iron bars at the lorry and shook his head. He was pissed at the driver who was notorious at cheating at cards and had clipped him out of a month’s worth of wages. “*Zadržati te Louse!*”

The driver continued on with his profanity laced ranting, having to do with the gate guard’s parental heritage coming from lonely old farmers fornicating with pigs as he jammed the lorry into gear.

As the lorry drove through the gates, Vukasin saw one of the camp inmates signaling with his finger sliding across his throat. Already he had a bad feeling about his and Dianne’s new home.

The lorry made a quick turn and slammed to a stop. Several of the new arrivals complained softly. The gate was dropped and the new arrivals were ordered out and told to line up. Vukasin squinted under the harsh sun. The air smelled rank, like old burnt death and looking across the nearby pathway, he could see inside a building where a large furnace blazed. Several women guards in stiff brown uniforms marched into the compound and the men guards yawned. The commander of the guard detachment stepped forward. “The women are to go over there to Camp III-C where they will work doing menial tasks. You men will stay here for the moment for job assessments.”

Dianne clutched his forearm.

He tried reassuring her. “Go along with it. If we do as we are told, we will survive. I love you, remember that always.”

She nodded and hesitantly joined the small group of women. The woman guard yelled out for them to follow her and Dianne looked back once then disappeared from view. His heart sank at the thought of what would happen to her.

The commander brushed the lint off his brown uniform before walking stiffly to the first man in the new group.

“You, old man. What is it you do?”

The old man licked his lips. “I am old and sick. I have nothing.”

The guard turned his head for a brief second. “Stand over there.” He moved on to the next man. “You? What is it you do?”

“Do?”

“Yes, are you a simpleton?”

The man started to say something but the commander cut him off with the wave of his hand “Stand over there with the old man.” He walked over to the next man. “You?”

“Blacksmith.”

“Stand over here.”

The guard walked to Vukasin. “You?”

“A doctor.”

“Stand there with the blacksmith.”

He shuffled off and stood next to the blacksmith. The roll call went on to the last of the new arrivals before those claiming to be too old or sick were ordered to the nearby factory. They turned and under guard escort, walked to the Brick Factory. The doors were wide open and everyone could see inside. Doors to a furnace were opened and Vukasin could feel a blast of heat emitting from the doorway. After several minutes, the guards picked up one of those that were deemed unworthy and thrown into the hungry flames. Vukasin’s mouth dropped open but there was nothing he or any else could do. The others were systematically thrown into the flames.

The commander then turned and smiled at those who remained. “You will work for your crimes and now you know the alternative if you do not. Some of you will live, some of you will die but you belong to us regardless.”

In the three months he had been interred to Jasenovac, he had witnessed hundreds of people being thrown alive into the burning furnace at the Brick Factory. On work detail across the Sava River, he had witnessed the Gypsies, the Ustaše guards personal helpers, take heavy hammers and crush the skulls of over seven hundred Serb men over open pits, with a single blow to the head. In time, though, the Gypsies also fell victim to the depravity of the Croat Ustaše guards. After a long night of feasting and drinking, the small band of sixty Gypsies were encouraged to partake in a feast and gorged themselves before the signal was given and they were felled with machine gun fire. He had seen the piles of human flesh and gobs of yellowed fat stacked on the tables in the soap factory, which gave off a sweet scent.

He cursed Jasenovac, the one hundred and fifty square mile concentration camp that bordered the Sava River that housed Serbs, Jews and others declared racially impure to the fascist regimes the war, the Nazis

and especially the Croat Ustaše that had bought anguish to what family he had.

The day he knew would always come had finally arrived. He sat up in his bunk at the sound of the barracks door being thrown open and everyone was called to stand at attention. The Ustaše guards had come and randomly called out more than a hundred names for work detail at the river Sava's edge. His name was called and his heart skipped a beat and felt the icy claws of death take hold. Anyone who had been called to duty to the river's edge had usually never returned. The inmates were funneled out to the fields and then to the River Sava's edge and then he saw his wife Dianne for the first time in months. They had forced their way through the mass of tightly packed lice-infested bodies, embraced and kissed for a long moment before four of the Ustaše camp guards had decided to pick this time for some fun.

The men he knew all too well. The priest, Javo Jelic, was notorious at killing. Within the holy sanctuary of his church, he kept the decapitated skulls of Serb workers near his altar, killed for such minor infractions such as not converting fast enough to failure to pray. The youngest looking of the group, Alezi Pavelic, was a relatively newcomer but he was catching the fever to kill as many of the Serb inmates as possible. Janko Solar and Duro Matos had proven themselves to be the most sadistic. He had seen first-hand their brands of brutality.

In the early days after his arrival, he and another inmate he knew to be Jewish had been given the job of stacking hay in the nearby abandoned village of Gradinia. The village had been predominantly Serb and quickly had been liquidated to the last man. Janko Solar was talking loudly to Duro Matos about the fine use of a knife blade as they approached the hay shed. Vukasin had quickly hid himself behind a stack of hay and watched as the Jew had stood erect, held his hat down to his side and saluted as per the required camp's strict guidelines. Matos stood to the side and watched with general disinterest. Solar had eyed his prey with interest. "What religion are you and what did you do before coming here?"

The Jew trembled. "A Jew and I was an attorney."

"Fuck your mother! I hate you fucking attorney types!" He quickly pulled a long bladed knife and grabbed hold of the Jew, forced him to his knees and, with a practiced hand, thrust the blade into his throat between his

larynx and esophagus. Blood poured from the wound, and the Jew's eyes were wide open.

"You see, Matos? I have enough experience with this blade. I can keep him alive for as long as I wish."

Matos spit then sneezed. The dust in the hay shed was overwhelming. "Yes, I see but I still prefer a pistol."

"You would. Now watch and learn something."

Vukasin had held a hand up to his mouth to quell his fear and to quiet his breathing. He tried looking away several times but he continued to watch in horror. After a moment, Solar yanked back on the Jew's head and pulled the blade forward. A spray of rich blood erupted from the gaping wound. The Jew had fallen, quivering to the ground.

Solar laughed then yelled out. "Grave diggers!"

Two men ran into the hay barn carrying a stretcher, as if they were following Solar around and picking up the dead and dying left in his wake. They quickly gathered up the twitching body of the Jew and left in a hurry as Solar licked the blade of his knife clean and sheaved it before walking away whistling a tune.

Vukasin shook away the memory. Now the four of them were eyeing him in interest. The few months he had been here, he tried very hard to stay out of eyesight of the guards, but within these final moments of life, they were interested in him or... Dianne. The four guards, laughing, then eyed the pair and wandered over. Vukasin attempted to shield Dianne as best he could. The other Serbs in the group began instinctively to move away.

"What is it that you do? Your papers!" The shorter, younger guard in the group demanded.

Vukasin looked at the man in the eye. He was no fighter but at the least if he was to die then these men would show that he had no fear. He handed over his papers but the guard let them fall to the muddy ground and stamped on them. Unfazed, Vukasin answered. "I am a doctor."

"Aw! A doctor? Solar, did you hear that?" Jelic grabbed the crucifixion hanging around his neck. "I am a priest. God is the better doctor." He shoved then spat at Vukasin. "I hate these men of science. Self proclaimed men of superior knowledge believing themselves to be above God."

He wiped the spit from his face slowly. Anger swelled within him. "I am sorry."

The short man known as Solar snarled. "A man of science? I was a butcher in the town of Sve Svete, I hate these people! They take money from everyone and curse people with magic potions." He grabbed Vukasin by the collar and pulled hard and eyed him within inches. "I can gut you quick..." He held up a knife, so affectionately called a 'Serb Cutter'. The knife was familiar in these parts for farming tools to harvest the thick bushels of wheat but here the blade had come to be used to harvest bloody Serbian souls. "...like pig!"

"Please." Diane laid a hand on Solar's arm.

"Ah..." Solar eyed Diane. "Oh what sweet marvel you are. I will show you my pig." He grabbed her by her long brown hair and tugged. She fought back but slipped in the mud. He cursed and jerked her through the mud then kicked her several times. Vukasin jumped forward and attempted a punch but the guard, known as Alezi, stepped back and laughed. Vukasin's muscles strained and he screamed in anger but then felt strong arms take hold of him and throw him to the ground. They held Vukasin down, knee on his head, and the priest had a handful of his hair forcing him to look over to see Dianne in the process of being raped. She tried crawling away from Solar as he undid his trouser belt. "You see my friends..." He lit up a cigarette. "...It is feasible to destroy the Serbs once and for all by using only this tool." He pointed at his erect member poking through his underwear. "This is the only weapon we Croats will ever need."

Javo Jelic stepped forward. Vukasin thought for a moment that perhaps he was going to put a stop to this being a priest but instead knelt down and showed a long thin blade. Before anyone could say anything, the blade was thrust many times into Dianne's back while Solar continued thrusting before finally relieving himself. He fell back, breathing heavily, then invited the other two to have a share. "Quick Duro, Alexi... jump in and have some fun before the flesh falls cold."

Duro shook his head. "God damn, you two bastards really fucked that bitch to death."

Vukasin felt the tears well up; his years in the medical field told him there was nothing he could do. He crawled forward then took hold of Dianne. Her breathing was shallow and a thin red ribbon trailed from the corner of her mouth. He cursed, slid his arms under her and lifted. The priest ran forward and kicked him. He fell hard with a loud grunt, much to the amusement of the others. He ignored the laughter and again lifted her

up. He remembered everything in a flash of a moment. From the first time he saw her walking down a side street to attend an art festival in Sisak to the night they were married several months later. He had done his best to give her everything she had wanted but the only thing she really wanted was the quiet evenings with the soft breeze of the evening blowing caressing their naked bodies.

Gone now. She shuddered weakly and died.

The mass of men and women were forced up against the banks of the river. Vukasin held onto Dianne, watching the blood drops fall to the ground. He raised his head to the light blue skies then with tear stained eyes whimpered to the heavens. Another guard detachment had arrived and quickly began setting up several MG42 general-purpose guns. The guards then loaded in long heavy belt of brass that glittered in the sun. The order was given and the forest erupted into a hail of copper jacketed death. Several guards pulled pins on their grenades and lobbed them into the running mass. Women wailed, men screamed and the mass turned to run to the river. Vukasin felt the slap of a bullet; he spun, fell and then was back up. He grabbed Dianne's arm and dragged her through the mud. All around him people fell. He had managed to make it to within twenty-five yards or so from the riverbanks when the ground shook with a dull thump and he felt the hot burning sensation in his leg. He fell, rolled over then sat up, dragging Dianne up to his chest to protect her. The machine guns roared out a wall of lead and grenades continued to blast holes in the mass. A woman ran by him only to have her head erupt in a geyser of blood and brain. A man staggered along holding his intestines while a younger man turned to charge the guards only to be cut in half. The mass crumpled in heaps until all were felled. A soft breeze blew. Vukasin could hear the rustling of the forest but he could not see through the thick cloud of cordite that drifted across the silent fields. The guards moved forward and began looking for survivors. He could hear a baby crying from somewhere far off to his right. Through the misty haze he could make out the bundled heap clutched in its mother's limp arm. A guard pulled a pistol and with a single shot ended the outburst.

Vukasin staggered to his knee. He looked around and saw the mass of bodies felled around him. How many? One hundred, two hundred, maybe? He looked up and saw the four guards walking through the fading haze.

"Fucking Jesus!" he heard Solar yell.

“Do not blaspheme!” Jelic remarked angrily.

“That fucker is still alive?” Duro shook his head then raised the Mosin Nagant rifle and took careful aim. Vukasin shuddered and closed his eyes waiting for the next moment of agony.

“No, wait. Let’s have a sporty shooting bet.” Alezi chambered a round in his pistol and nodded to Duro.

Duro shrugged, slung the rifle over his shoulder. “The bastard that kills that Serb buys the drinks.” He pulled out a small automatic pistol, took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. Vukasin spun, felt the deep burn in his thigh. He grunted and fell over onto his good hand.

Duro laughed, held the pistol up and shrugged to those around him. Laughing, they took their own pistols out and took aim and fired. The bullets kicked up a geyser of mud or buzzed by with an angry arc. He craned his head and squatted back on his haunches. They were laughing and taking aim with their pistols. How could God allow any of this to happen? Why was He ignoring all this hell on earth and still remaining silent? He cried out in rage and told himself if he survived he would kill these men.

Janko Solar stepped forward, took careful aim with his pistol.

The gunshot roared and a sudden pain erupted into his brain. A burst of light slowly dimmed to darkness and he felt himself fall over, still holding on to Dianne’s arm. A bright light and blissful darkness followed. He came to every few minutes. He opened one sticky eyelid and was surprised to find himself thinking.

“The bastard’s awake.”

A snort of laughter. “By fucking God!” A face loomed in front of him. Janko leered. “A tough bastard. A fucking shot to the head! Damn bullet too small. I told the lot of you to stay with the Nagant pistol or P-38 but you wanted tiny automatics.” He looked once. “Naw By fuck he’ll be dead soon enough.”

A tug on his legs and he could feel them trying to lift the limp limbs.

A pair of boots sloshed just above him and he slowly turned his eyes up into the blinding sun and saw the crucifix dangling from the neck of the priest. “He lives?”

“Fucking incredible, isn’t it? I was just telling Duro that using that fucking tiny toy automatic is pointless. Of course he still lives, you cursed fuck.”

“Please do not blaspheme.”

“Get off your pulpit, priest, and grab hold. If the Devil is here he can swim for this soul Duro, grab the Jew bitch and hurry; we have another hundred dead fucking Serbs to toss in the river.”

Vukasin would have tried to fend off the men but it was futile. He fell back into the void but felt the sensation of flying for a brief moment then a persistent wet chill that ran throughout his body. He came to several times and saw only a murky gloom and knew he was tumbling through the murky void of the Sava River. He felt the urge to rise up to the surface. He did so but not voluntarily. A hand grabbed for him and he thrashed about the waters, fearing the guards had seen him and wanted another round of sport. A hard yank and he came up from the waters and felt himself being dragged off into the nearby forest that grew so thick along the banks. He heard whispers, frantically spoken, roaring about him.

“Is he alive? God tell me we did not go through this trouble to save a dead man.”

The crunching of leaves and grunts of effort was all he could make out.

“Headshot... he won't live long.”

Vukasin raised a finger but it went unnoticed. The words echoed over and over in his head.

“What should we do with him then? This was all a very bad idea.”

A long pause. “We save the man.”

“This is insane! We could be seen.”

“That is true but we are not savages who throw bodies into the Sava River.”

“We would be doing him a favor if we threw him back in the river and be done with this.” A third voice whispered.

“And then?”

“Then what?”

“How can you live with yourself afterwards with killing an innocent Serb? One of our countryman?”

“Peter...” the man groaned.

“No, if we can save one... we save our future.”

A silence then after several minutes. “Okay but we can do this no more. Our camp is full, the food is thin as it is and this one does not look like he is a fighter.”

Vukasin fell back into the blissful realm of darkness. At this point he could have cared less if he lived or died. He did not know how long he was swimming around in the inky darkness of the unconsciousness, but he came to and felt as if his head had been split open and a fever wracked his body. He looked over; a group of men were huddled by a small flame cooking what he assumed to be a rabbit. A large, bearded man in the group nodded toward Vukasin. "Your patient is awake."

A thinner man in the group tossed a bone he had been gnawing on to the ground. He then quickly wiped the grease from his fingers on his shirtfront. He stepped forward then knelt down beside him. "My friend..." He lit a cigarette. "You are most fortunate. You maybe jerked back at last minute while being shot but you have infection, *Da?* So please relax and heal yourself. You are with friends now. We are partisans fighting the Nazis and the Ustaše." He paused to spit as if the words tasted bitter. "...We will help you so please relax."

Vukasin nodded slowly.

"The bullet has grazed your skull and left a groove in the bone. It did not smash through, though." He shrugged and held his hands open. "Maybe you live, maybe you die but this is only up to God."

The men faded into a cluster of twisting blurs then finally back to the inky darkness of unconsciousness. He had wanted to know about Dianne but then fell away to sleep and heal while the small flame of revenge began to burn in the pit of his stomach.



Several weeks went by before Vukasin was able to sit up and eat on his own. The men and women in the group he knew to be partisans fighting from the shadows and dying also. He saw the man Peter and waved him over to join him by the campfire within the cave.

"Ahh, Vukasin you look much better."

Vukasin placed his fingers along the deep furrow made by the bullet along his skull. "Does it look better?"

Peter leaned over, examined the injury. "Yes, much. God has spared you."

"I have something to ask of you."

“Your wife? You spoke of a Dianne while in a feverish state.” Peter sat down on the nearby log and warmed himself by the fire. He already knew that Vukasin would ask. “There were many bodies floating by.”

He waved this off. “I know she is in the Sava River still.” Vukasin took the cup of coffee and sipped. “My wife. She was an artist, a painter. Every morning she would paint. When the Nazis came they took our house and everything in it for their own then burned her paintings, claiming it was too Jewish. It was one of the nicest homes in Sisak.”

Peter smashed the remnants of his cigarette with his booted heel. “Everyone had nice things before the war. I was a baker making small business in Topolovac. Everyone was happy and we even had Croats for neighbors. They were pleasant people. When Nazis came they quickly became our enemy. This I cannot understand...”

“Understand?”

“Yes why we were neighbors one day then hate each other the next. These same neighbors then join the Ustaše, then take my sister and her family then line them up and shoot them along with other village Serbs.” He looked away, pausing for a long moment lost in the memory. “I found them that way and joined partisan effort to avenge their deaths. So long ago...”

“You have fought for a long time. I have to ask you something.”

“Yes, Vukasin?”

“Teach me to fight and kill.”

He leaned back. “You are a doctor, you are supposed to save lives not take them.”

“I have a blood debt that needs to be fulfilled.”

They were silent for a moment, with the campfire between them snapping and popping. Peter looked into the flames. “You help us by being a doctor. I do not see how you could help doing otherwise.”

“I have seen death many times over; I have to kill those responsible for the murder of my wife.”

Peter stood up. “You talk of foolishness.”

Vukasin stood up and grabbed Peter's arm. “My wife did not deserve to die like that!”

He was surprised at the power in his hand. “Many people are dead and have died terribly. You alone are not the only one to have suffered these things.”

“And yet you fight to avenge your family? Yes?”

He nodded.

“Then I too wish to fight... to avenge my own. Do not say no to this but I need to learn to use the tools to kill.”

Peter stood up, flipped his cigarette into the flames then sighed. After a long moment he nodded. “Okay, Vukasin, we will show you these things.”

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The weeks blurred into months. The lulls in the partisan fight against the Nazis and the Croat fascist regime were taken up with educational means. Vukasin learned the fine art of killing through various methods. The partisan group often fought and died on the run and he grew lean and wolf-like in appearance. Along with the killing storm that raged around them, Vukasin applied his medical knowledge to helping the men in the group but with the limited amount of medical supplies, it was difficult to save some of them. He had been a small town doctor in the early years of the war and practiced his belief that there was good in all men regardless of creed and nationality or religion. Now though he disregarded all of this but learned to apply these medical skills to torture of captured Wehrmacht or SS soldiers and he especially relished it when the partisans had captured an officer of Ustaše. His first warm up in obtaining information or enemy plans from them was to hammer a couple of spent rifle casings under their kneecaps. It mattered not if they were willing to tell him everything beforehand. He learned to garrote a sentry, manufacture and plant explosives, especially at the rail lines that feed the prison camps of Jasenovac. Even if for a short time, the prisoners inside the rail cars would at the least have another day to live.

Eventually in 1945, the Nazis began to lose ground and retreated back to Germany. The Soviet war machine had dealt too many crippling blows and there were too few men to fill the gaps. The Soviets it seemed had an unlimited supply of men and machines and used it to great effect to eradicate the Nazis wherever they could.

In April of 1945, Vukasin and the partisan fighters had fought the Ustaše in the towns and villages surrounding Jasenovac before concentrating their full efforts on the concentration camp itself. They entered Jasenovac in the early morning hours and were preparing to fight the Ustaše militia but they sensed something was not right. Vukasin had

been upbeat about entering the camp and hoped to find the four men responsible for his wife's murder still present. He had special plans and ideas on torturing them for days before killing them in some brutal method. The camp was too quiet, though, and the heavy stench of rotten death mingled with the heavy smoke that floated through the air. There was no noise of the usual morning rattling jangle of leg chains the inmate wore or any alarm raised to the approaching partisan group.

Through the smoky haze, Vukasin moved forward at a half crouch holding the MP 40 at the ready. He narrowed his eyes, focusing on the bodies lying on the muddy ground before him, noting the freshness of the gunshot wounds they had suffered. He prayed he was not too late to extract his revenge and even vowed silently to give a little retribution for the sake of those lying dead before him. He studied the door to a nearby warehouse and prepared himself to enter.

Peter slid up beside him, breathing heavily. "Now, Vukasin, remember we are a better people than those responsible for this. We must have some for ourselves."

"Not if I find them first, Peter." He slid off the wall and ran to the nearby warehouse door. Smashing his shoulder against it, he broke the door off its hinges and fell in with the muzzle of his MP 40 sweeping the room. There was no point in firing a shot. The stench of death rose up to assail his nostrils and after a minute his eyes adjusted to the dimness of the rooms. The hundred or so prisoners had been executed in a final solution decreed by the prison guards. The bodies were piled up on one another, shot down with machine gun fire. Men, women, children and elderly, stared up with empty dead eyes into his soul as if asking him why he was so late to save them.

Peter ran up behind him, swore and slung his rifle over his shoulder. He stepped back and scrubbed the toe of his boot against the concrete floor, wiping away the sticky blood that had pooled in the room and waved away the flies that swarmed over the corpses, lapping at the rotting moisture. He swore then took the lapel of his jacket and covered his nose and mouth to hold out the worst of the stench. "The prisoners are all dead and the guards are gone. We can do nothing now."

Vukasin stepped outside, swore then raised his head to the angry skies. He let loose a cry of rage that he hoped would shake the heavens and rouse the sleepy God that had allowed any of this to happen. His roar

echoed through the hollow camp and the surrounding forest. He vowed the day would come when he would have his revenge against those men who had murdered his beloved wife.

OCTOBER 9th, 1962 - JAVO JELIC

The years had passed; the war had met its end, as all things do. The Germans had retreated back to within their borders with the Russian armies tearing at their heels. The former guards at Jasenovac had also taken to the road to escape their connections at Jasenovac. Within the last few months of the war, the camp had taken on a darker tone and began slaughtering its remaining inmates and destroying all paperwork associated with an exact number of those slain and any details on the guards who were there. The remaining days fell into the last inmates staging a revolt armed with only small hammers, pipes and makeshift clubs. Only twenty-two inmates survived. The Ustaše militia guards then shed their uniforms and melted away into the long lines of refugees that had so often clogged the roads.

The Roman Catholic Church, who so often turned a blind eye to the deaths of thousands and at times sanctioned such actions, took in many of the guards and helped them rebuild their lives either in the quiet sanctuaries found in South America. There were those who chose to stay on in their homeland of Yugoslavia, unashamed of their dealings with the wholesale slaughter at Jasenovac.

Father Javo Jelic shivered, remembering those years. He pulled his robes tighter to ward off the worst of the chill of the early night air. He had chosen to remain in his home country and to continue on with the Catholic Church after receiving forgiveness for his actions at Jasenovac. He, on the other hand, had spent years trying to forgive himself. The ghosts from the past persistently haunted his dreams and tonight were no exception.

The night was soulless in its darkness with only a thin curved sliver of the moon to shower the land with its dull light. The town of Lonja slept and only the peasant men of the village drank into the early nighttime hours. Women whispered into the ears of potential customers about things carnal while they drank and boisterously fought each other from time to time in the taverns. The local priests often partook in these festivities, claiming it was a time to 'save souls' but too often fell into the debauchery.

Jelic watched over the town from his narrow window, praying for the souls lost below and wishing they would expunge their sins. None below, though, could know the burden and price of sin that he bore in silence. So long ago, in the prison camp of Jasenovac, he had led people to God, at least in the beginning. The savagery he had witnessed there and the Nazi war machine plowing the countryside to ruin leaving many dead people in its wake, had changed him.

He shuttered the window, went to his desk, knelt down and prayed to the portrait of Mother Mary holding the small babe Jesus. He prayed nightly asking God to forgive him for his sins. The Holy Scriptures proclaimed to ask for forgiveness and it would be received but it did nothing to stop the terrible dreams that haunted him. The dreams came as soon as he fell asleep. Times of vicious weakness of the flesh, a time when being a priest meant something to him but along the way in the camp of Jasenovac, he had fallen into the temptations. He had seen the viciousness of the guards around him who encouraged him to partake in the violence of the blood storm that raged around him. He had wanted revenge for his mother, who was raped before being nailed to the side of the house and shot for target practice. His anger grew to resent those Serbians, the Jews, the gypsies... mongrels all that had come to his services hoping for reprieve and a chance to convert to Catholic then free from the horrors of Jasenovac.

He refused to let that happen. He had accepted a bet with the camp guards, to kill as many of the inmates as possible in a single night. He had taken an axe and beheaded many, then took the heads and decorated the sanctuary altar. He would punish those for the most minor of offenses and take their heads to add to his growing collection. Over eight hundred in all and the small church smelt of rot and decay but his Godly duties went on. His name changed from Father Jelic to Father Satan, the cruelest priest to ever be within God's flock.

He prayed, crying silently to God as he did every night... for those sins. He clutched the rosary beads with hard intent. His soul was restless, searching and wanting the things of God. Tears fell from hard closed eyes. How could he do such things so long ago? He begged, cried aloud and mourned those he had killed.

The noise stopped him cold. The sound of metal scraping along the hard stone floor of the church monastery. He stood up and strained to listen. He wiped away his tears then listened to the darkness and only heard the

sound of his blood coursing through his veins. He walked over to his dormitory door, opened it then looked down both ways in the wide hall. He heard and saw nothing.

The sound blew in behind him, adrenaline shot through his veins and he looked behind him. A man stood there, dressed in commoner's clothes, his eyes looking deep into his soul. The man brought up a small axe, resting it across his shoulder. Javo slowly closed the door and wet his lips. His throat felt suddenly dry.

The man took hold of him and threw him away from the door. The priest offered no resistance. He fell to the floor then slowly got up to knees still clutching his rosary beads. He sensed his sins of the past had caught up with him.

The man removed his hat and tossed it to the bed but held onto his axe. "I remember you, a priest, led people in prayer before taking an axe and murdering members of your congregation for such minor offenses. You even went so far as to go to the river Sava and slaughter more with your axe. I remember you and what you did to my wife." He lifted the weapon. "This axe I pulled from the ruins of Jasenovac many years ago. It has the blood of countless innocent people engrained within its metal, even perhaps that of my wife. They cry out for your blood."

Shivering, Jelic clutched his rosary beads tight. There was no point in trying to convince this man that he deserved to live. He prayed quickly for the Saints to help him. "I am truly sorry, please forgive me."

"I will not give you what you seek."

"Your eyes... I remember your eyes and your wife... at the river's edge."

"Your memory is well intact. Where are the others? Duro Matos and Alexi Pavelic?"

"Why would I encourage your violence?"

"I can make it quick..." Vukasin produced a knife and held it up for him to see. "...Or long and painful."

Jelic shivered. "I cannot do as you request because violence ends in violence and I cannot be used as an instrument of such. I ask though that you forgive me for my past transgressions against you."

"There in heaven is perhaps forgiveness..." He held the axe at mid waist, twisting the head away. "...But here on earth there will be none for you. This I will see to." He swung the axe down then up over his head



before concentrating all his muscles in his back and arms to force the blade down. Javo Jenko screamed and felt the agony as the blade sunk into his skull and the dull sound in his ears from the grating of broken bones as the blade was pulled free.

APRIL 4<sup>th</sup>, 1969 - JANKO SOLAR

Vukasin removed his jacket and laid it over a nearby crate. The large halves of cows hung from stainless steel hooks in the well-lit meat locker and the smell reminded him of years ago. He spent a moment rolling up the sleeves of his shirt then thought better of it. He slowly unbuttoned his shirt, removed it and laid it over his jacket.

He had tracked Janko Solar to Sve Svete. He had proven to be easy enough to find. Solar had disappeared from Jasenovac and retreated back to his hometown of Sve Svete to a quiet hero's welcome. He had resumed his former occupation as a butcher and had cut his meats with precision. When asked about how he had learned his profession with such precision, he laughed and admitted freely he had plenty of practice on Serbian meats at Jasenovac. Vukasin migrated to the small town and quickly located Solar then began to bid his time.

He had watched the heavily muscled man pick up sides of cows easily from the delivery truck, thrown it across his shoulder before marching into the back door leading to the meat locker. Tackling the man physically would be an improbability, so he resorted to trickery to overwhelm him. He had managed to slip through the back door, armed with a heavy club and waited for Solar to enter the meat locker at closing time. Usually Solar would enter the meat locker and take choice cuts from his latest shipment before walking home with his package tucked up under his arm. Tonight though, Vukasin hid behind a stack of wine crates by the entrance and as soon as the meat locker door opened and Solar stepped through, he swung the heavy club down on his head. It took another two good smacks to finally knock the big man out. Breathing heavily, Vukasin then tied the man up on the wide rectangular support beam in the middle of the locker and stripped him down to his underwear.

Janko Solar came to and looked around then laughed softly, the only sound to echo throughout the meat locker. "You think I should fear you? I

have no fear of you!” He spat a chunk of phlegm. “What have you in need of me?”

Vukasin smiled, opened the rucksack, reached inside and removed an axe. “After so long, we finally get to meet on a more personal level. I was at Jasenovac, although you might not remember me.” He held the axe up and examined the edge, running a finger across it. “Which part of a pig is a choice cut?”

Solar craned his head in misunderstanding. “Choice cut... on a pig? You were at Jasenovac? I thought you were a fucking Serb. Cut me loose and I’ll show you a choice cut!”

Vukasin smiled. He placed the axe down, then slipped on a pair of gloves before picking up a long knife. “You don’t remember me but you will discover this in our brief time together.” He quickly cut away the underwear and tossed the garments to the side. Solar yelped and tensed against the ropes that held him as Vukasin grabbed hold of his genitals and placed the blade at the base of his penis.

Solar began to sweat and shook his head. He tried rolling away, arching his body but the ropes were too tight. His mind began to clear and he realized the events unfolding. “Fuck you, Serb!”

“After tonight, you fuck no more.” He cut the genitals off and Solar screamed. Blood poured from the stump and Vukasin tossed the stalk of manhood into a pile of meat scraps in the corner of the room. He took a hand held propane torch, struck off his Zippo lighter and ignited the blue flame before lighting his cigarette. Solar rolled his eyes then passed out from shock and agony. Vukasin waved the lit end over the gushing wound. “Not so soon, old friend. There will be time enough for dying...” The stench of cooking flesh and burnt hair assailed his nostrils. Once the blood had stopped flowing, he turned the propane off and grunted. “...but for now we will revisit some old times, *Da?*”

APRIL 30th, 1980 - ALEZI PAVELIC

Vukasin wandered the streets of Sisak. It was strange to return to his hometown after so many years traveling the country looking for those responsible for the murder of his wife. His mind was set on determining if Alezi Pavelic had in fact died before he could get to him. He had spent countless nights imagining the horrors he would bring to Alezi and finally

settled on the knife to slowly strip off his flesh first then perhaps his fingers one joint at a time. Everything would have to be taken in time and he had obtained a small quantity of morphine to help Alezi endure the agony while he cut away his extremities.

It had taken him more years to figure out just Alezi's, the youngest in the guard group from Jasenovac, whereabouts. He had spent countless hours researching in libraries and churches that held on to some genealogy materials such as family bibles. Alezi had slipped away after helping destroy his connections to Jasenovac and retreated into the dark shadows of the unknown void after the Nazis had pulled out.

Where had he gone? He hoped he had not gone to Argentina as most former Nazis or former Ustaše had done. He studied for countless hours when he was not working as a mechanic or a baker's helper and at times as a medical assistant. As in all things, Vukasin was a creature of habit. He loathed being anywhere near the medical field. He had learned long ago that man was not worth saving or helping and often questioned why God could allow mankind to continue on its venture to allow genocide. The answer that God gave in return was a deafening silence.

The morning came and he found himself reading the newspaper and checking the obituaries only to find a name that caught his attention. Alezi Pavelic, age fifty-five, died of apparent natural causes associated with a bad heart. His wife had died several years before from an accident, having been run over by a truck as she crossed the road. He was a self-professed war hero but spoke little of his experience. The obituary stated he had fought with the Germans on many of their campaigns and several names of battles were listed.

Then the name Jasenovac was listed. He had spent some time as a guard in 1943-1944. The picture below the obituary showed a much older Alexi Pavelic and instantly he recognized the half smiling face. Through the small thin wrinkles of time, Vukasin mentally ironed out the wrinkles and knew instantly who he was looking at. After all this time the son of a bitch was hiding right under his nose. He grabbed his jacket and walked out of his apartment.

He stopped at a smoke shop, bought a pack of cigarettes. He lit one up and eyed the cemetery across the street. Time was going against him and those he sought. He had killed two, Alexi had died from natural causes and there was only Duro Matos left, and he had some idea where he was

located. He walked into the Viktorovac cemetery and began looking for the final resting spot of Alezi Pavelic. He had searched for over an hour before finally locating the gravesite and swore under his breath.

He dropped his cigarette on Alezi's grave and stamped out the butt with his booted heel. Anger swelled up in him and he swore Alezi to be forever a piece of shit. "*Govno yedno.*"

He looked around and saw no one looking or that anyone was in the cemetery, for that matter. He undid his trousers and pissed on the tombstone. It was the least he could do. He had so much hope in killing Alezi with his own hands. He made a resolve to find Duro Matos before time literally caught up with all of them.

## SEPTEMBER, 1991 - DURO MATOS

The winds of time had blown Vukasin from one end of Yugoslavia to the other. He had resumed his time as a mechanic, opening a small shop within the town of Vukovor in early 1991. The trail to Duro Matos had led to here but he had still been unable to locate him. As with all things political, the familiar winds of Fascism grew and the Croats wanted to tear away from Yugoslavia to form their own nation. The other territories within Yugoslavia resisted the move and war finally broke out. The Croatian Ustaše had also been reborn and with it the same checkerboard pattern flew on national flags. Regardless of the 600,000 Serbs still living within the Croatian state, Croat leader, Franjo Tudman, using the guise of freedom to gather foreign sympathies, had secretly begun expunging Serbs from within their lands. Croatian Ustaše militia units had also resumed mass genocide of the Serbs. The eyes of the International leaders again turned a blind eye to the growing threat of the old regime while other countries such as Germany spoke for the benefits of the Fascist regime in parliaments and UN council groups.

Vukasin had seen enough of the current events unfolding before him to see that no country actually cared for Yugoslavia or its troubles unless it was for some financial gain or strategic military purpose. For the most part, the Croats, Serbs and Muslims had lived in peace but that relative calm was being threatened by an old ideology. He carried on with his hunt for Duro Matos and found a lead pertaining to him being a small and relatively quiet individual who had a large family farming a section of land outside the city limits. He had scoped the place time and again and only saw a glimpse of an

old man in his early seventies that he believed to be Duro. He was going to have to strike - and soon.

In April his plans had shifted, not by his hand but by the current events. The Serbian military force and Yugoslavia military gathered around Vukovar and prepared for an assault to destroy and capture the Croat rebels massed within. When the siege began from the air, Vukosin realized he was trapped within the city center and had to hunker down in the basement of his home until a lull in the battle could be found. Weeks stretched into months with the Serbs pounding the city with artillery. Serb soldiers and tanks moved in and fought the vicious battle from house to house, fighting the rogue Croat forces that were soon forced to fall back to the city center. By the end of August the once clean and peaceful city had been reduced to rubble.

Vukasin raised his aching head and listened. Blood dripped from his nose as a result of the concussion waves from the constant bombardment from Serb artillery and tank fire. The shelling had stopped and he stood up and peered out of the cellar window to the farmhouse where Duro Matos remained hidden. He had to leave his own home and sought shelter to at least see if Duro was in fact at the farm. A regiment of Serb soldiers had paid a visit to the farmhouse earlier but he knew nothing more. He picked up his backpack, which contained his killing tools and foodstuff. He hoped that Matos was alive. He pushed aside the wooden planks to the streets outside and crawled through then moved across the street toward the farmhouse.

He saw the old man wandering outside with his head in his hands. Following close behind him was a young boy of no more than twelve years old. They talked for several minutes then went back inside. From down the street he could see another group of Serb soldiers roaming and searching house to house before making their way to the farmhouse. Vukasin moved closer to a large pile of firewood that would probably never see a fireplace, then he saw the man and the boy running across the open fields to the edge of the forest. He took his knife blade and ran after them. It took time but he managed to catch sight of them and dashed forward, mindful of a deep nearby ravine.

Winded and gasping for breath, Vukasin came within several yards from behind, his knife shaking in his hand. "Duro!"

The old man paused and turned.

The boy stopped. "Who is this man, grandfather?"

Vukasin leapt forward and jerked the boy away before Duro could react. When he placed the blade under the boy's throat, Duro moaned aloud. "Stop!" He leaned over and placed his hands on his knees. "I have heard of you. I feared one day you would come. Alezi also feared you would come and died from a bad heart because of this. Look at us, old men now. Please let the boy go."

"Why should I do this?" He held the blade tighter against the boy's throat. He whimpered. "I owe you nothing."

"He has no one!"

"Just as I have no one! For long years and long nights I've wondered what would it be like to have my Dianne with me but you took her from me."

Matos whimpered, knelt down, crawling forward on his knees, holding his hands together. "I beg of you to let the boy go. He has lost everything dear to him as it is." He sniffled, wiped the running mucus from his nose then pointed back towards the battered, smoking ruins of the city. "His parents, his sisters and uncle killed by the Serb army. They do nothing to anyone. I find him there in the house, huddled near his mother. I am all that's left. You come and kill me and leave the boy."

Vukasin leered and released the boy from his grasp and stepped toward Duro. After so long he had finally achieved his final goal. Nothing else would matter now and he could finish out his days knowing that he had avenged Dianne. He held the knife at waist height. Duro remained on his knees, apologizing for his actions.

Vukasin raised his knife to plunge it downward in a sweeping motion but suddenly felt a burning in the back of his leg and a loud grunt of effort from the boy. He turned his head and screamed at seeing a small knife imbedded in the back of his leg. The boy staggered back a step, looking at the blade as it pulsed with each muscle spasm, unbelieving that he could do such a thing. Vukasin smacked the boy hard enough to send him sprawling before feeling the full weight of Duro smashing into him sending him over a deep ravine that was nearby. Vukasin plunged headlong, flailing his arms and seeing the rocks below rushing up to him and screamed.

Duro went to the edge and knelt down and peered over the ledge. He could see Vukasin below. A dark red splash of blood and bone gristle sprayed out in a wide arc over the rocks from his crushed head. The hard

eyes had resumed the familiar look he now recalled from Jasenovac. A soft touch from the small boy brought him around.

“*Deda?* I did not mean to stab him but I was not going to let him hurt you.”

“I understand.”

“I would do this again.” The boy pointed at Vukasin’s body. “He was only a Serb. Surely papa would have been happy.”

Duro took hold and shook the boy. “No, I do not want this for you, Andros.” He paused and looked around. Already the wooded forest was coming alive with distant footfalls rustling the dead leaves and the snapping of branches in the distance. “I have no time to explain such things but I was not a good man in my younger years. You must promise me you will not take this road such as this man has done. Leave the hate of one another to others.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Please, do not take this road to revenge or hate. Promise me now.”

The boy looked puzzled while peering into his grandfather’s eyes, not understanding the reasons. The forest birds had fell quiet. Duro looked about as several Serb soldiers emerged from the thick undergrowth nearby. Duro pointed to a small hole hidden deep under a bush. “Quickly!” he whispered. He ushered the youth into the indentation and began quickly scooping the dead leaves to conceal him further. The boy started to protest but Duro quickly admonished him to stay still and quiet as if they were hunting. “I will return, Andros, but you must stay and be quiet.”

He began running at a half crouch away from the boy. He had run through the bushes when a shout raised the alarm and several soldiers chased after him. Within minutes the soldiers tackled Duro to the damp earth floor and held a knife to his throat while others pointed AK47s at him.

The Serb soldier that sat on Duro’s chest exhaled sharply and narrowed his eyes. “You a Croat.”

Duro shivered.

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The scream echoed throughout the forest trees. Andros staggered to his knees but remembering what his grandfather had told him, he laid back down. Out in the forest Serb soldiers roamed and he could see some of

them. The prominent patch with White Eagle Special Forces unit displayed on the sleeves of their jackets burned into his memory. Several men joked and lit up cigarettes as they walked away. He could hear only bits and fragments of the conversations but it told him nothing of his grandfather's whereabouts.

The soldiers left, the sounds of the forest returning to some mild form of normalcy. Andros lay on the damp earth for an hour before he started to wonder if his grandfather was going to return. He moved the wall of leaves from his hiding place and moved out into the open, careful to stay low and moved away to find his grandfather. After an hour of searching through the thick undergrowth and trees, he found him in a small clearing.

Duro Matos was strapped to a tree with parachute cord. The Serb militia unit had tied the old man to the tree before doing the unthinkable. Matos' coat had been flung into the nearby bushes and then his shirt ripped open to expose his large belly. A large slit sagged open, exposing the dark, congealed innards and at his feet laid a pile of his intestines. The boy murmured, tears welled up in his eyes and he leaned over to touch his grandfather.

"*Deda!*" he cried through tear wracked sobs, repeating himself, hoping the old man would come back to life and fix himself as he had fixed the machines around the family farm. The old man did not move and he felt the cold and stiffness already settling into the hands and joints. The sun was setting and the cold of the night was coming. The boy took up the overcoat thrown in the bushes and eyed his grandfather's finger. He saw the ring. His grandfather had spoken of the ring given to him personally by Ante Pavelic just before the Second World War. It was his most prized possession but not of pride in what he had done but held it as a symbol of remorse for things he had done or so he had said. He held up the hand and removed the ring. He believed his grandfather would have wanted him to have it. As for burying him, he hated the thought of leaving his grandfather hanging on the tree but with no shovel or other means of tools and the Serbs still roaming the woods, he would have to flee, though where to was another matter. He would retreat further into the Croatian nation and bid his time. He also would learn the art of killing for the war was going to be a long affair.

Andro Matos shook in rage and raised his head to the angry, cloud strewn skies above. He vowed that the day would come when he would have his revenge against the Serb soldiers who had done this.

RETURNING THE TOOLS...

Neil Leckman

Toolbox

I see you borrowed a tool or two
Put them back when you are through
I'm glad you found them good to use
No matter what the style of your abuse
Now close the lid and lock it tight
We shall say our last goodnight
Sorry, friend, can't let you free
Time for the bloodiest tool of all, me!!!

MEET THE AUTHORS

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He's had a byline (for brief humorous items) in over one-hundred different newspapers and magazines. His fiction has appeared online at *Liquid Imagination*, *The Red Asylum*, *Sorcerous Signals*, *Thrillers*, *Killers 'n' Chillers*, and elsewhere, as well as in a number of print anthologies, including *Ghost Stories—Western Style* (Static Movement, 2012).

Robert Evangelista is from Sydney in Australia. He has had a keen interest in books, reading, writing and horror among many other things since childhood. He has always wanted to pursue a career in the field of storytelling. Having read so many great stories and books over the years he can only try his best to bring to someone out there some of the same experiences and feelings he has gained from being an avid reader all these years.

Dave Fragments retired to the countryside of Western Pennsylvania amid the deer, squirrels and his imagination to write short stories. He is published in anthologies from Psychopomp, Static Movement, Red Skies Press, Fantastic Horror, Darkened Horizons, and online at The WiFiles, Kalkion, Perihelion, Golden Visions, Tiny Globule, Yankee Pot Roast, and Flashquake. An occasional poem is available but rare. Dave used to conduct research into coal liquefaction and heterogeneous catalysis and that has morphed into horror, Sci-Fi and Fantasy about robots, strange transformations, demons and satyrs, cavorting simians, the Undead, time travel, devilish happenings and Cthulhu visitations.

David Frazier took creative writing classes at Bernard Klienman Learning Center. He wrote a short story for the book, *Kindred Voices 2* published by the University of Massachusetts. He and editor/publisher James Ward Kirk of Indianapolis, IN have mutual respect for one another.

Ken Goldman, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore depending upon his mood and the track of the sun. His stories have appeared in over 640 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia with over twenty due for publication in 2012-13. Since 1993 Ken's tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror.

Stuart Holland is an author and publisher under the name of Fiction4All at www.fiction4all.com. Mostly Stuart writes crime fiction but under a nom de plume he has also written a number of adventure books for children. Stuart is married with two children, four rabbits and three dogs. Apart from writing and running around after his nearly teenage kids, Stuart plays golf (badly). Fiction4All was created to allow new authors to get their books published electronically and also in paperback where practicable, without getting ripped off by vanity press organisations.

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as *The Horror Zine Magazine*, *Dark Eclipse*, *Schlock*, *The Sirens Call*, *Apehlion* and *Trembles Horror Magazine*. He has also contributed to several anthologies from *Horrificated Press*, *James Ward Kirk Fiction*, *Source Point Press* and other publisher. Homepage: <http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/>

Ken L. Jones has been professionally active in the world of popular culture for the last thirty years. He first gained notice for his numerous articles and interviews in all of the comic book trade magazines. He later worked prolifically as a writer of comic books at Disney and Harvey Comics and

on many independent titles including the one he co-created with horror director David Todd Ocvirk, the well-regarded horror tome Uncle Tickle.

Kevin L. Jones has been involved with the creative arts for many years and has co-written several comic books. He has contributed several short stories to House of Horror and their anthologies DEADication and Soup of Souls as well as co-authoring the short story collection Mind Rotting Tales available from Panic Press.

Julie R Kendrick is an English author from rural Northamptonshire. She has written many short stories and has had her work published in various anthologies. She is currently working on her first book, a paranormal story for young adults.

Ron Koppelberger is a poet, short story writer and artist. He has written 103 books of poetry over the past several years and 18 novels. His art is viewable on Facebook under [will806095@bellsouth.net](https://www.facebook.com/will806095@bellsouth.net).

John Kujawski has interests that range from guitars to the Incredible Hulk. He was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri and still lives there to this day. You can hear him on the weekly podcast at www.comicbookshowdown.com.

Neil Leckman lives in Colorado with his wife of more than thirty years and only recently began writing seriously. He does it for fun, to share with others and hopes you enjoy the ride.

Thomas M. Malafarina (www.ThomasMMalafarina.com) is an author of horror fiction from Berks County, Pennsylvania. All of his books have been published through Sunbury Press. (www.Sunburypress.com).

Gary Murphy lives in Egremont, West Cumbria, UK, where he writes full-time. As well as having over 20 short stories published in varied anthologies in 2013, he is the author of horror collections 'Nerds Unite', 'Scared Shitless', novel 'A Twisted Love Story', the 'Wide Awake and Dead' series of anthologies (volumes 1 – 5), collected works 'Spawned by Eden' and also the vampire novella 'BloodZone'. A pirate/horror novella 'Hellish Redcap' will be released in 2014, by James Ward Kirk Publishing. He is currently studying for a BA Honorary degree in History. Many of his stories are in Horrified Press publications, as well as other publications and webzines such as Schlock and Death Throes. Gary can be located on Facebook by simply 'Gary Murphy', or emailed at gazvespa69@hotmail.com He welcomes fans new and old and is always willing to chat. Feel free to get in touch.

J.R. Roper is a teacher and speculative fiction writer from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Horror is his favorite genre for short fiction and when poetry is gifted from the Muses, it is always dark. He has written two middle grade fantasy novels and is working on his third novel, a YA fantasy. Coffee runs in his veins.

John L. Thompson currently lives within New Mexico. He works the ungodly grind by day and becomes a chain-smoking writer at night. His stories and poetry have appeared in such publications as *Battlespace*, *Adobe Walls Poetry Anthologies*, *RuneWrights Best Served Cold Anthology*, *Science Fiction Trails* and several *Static Movement Press Anthologies*.

Tim Tobin holds a degree in mathematics from LaSalle University. He retired from L-3 Communications after a career in software engineering. He has had many short stories and poems published. He is a member of the South Jersey Writer's Group and of the Dead Poets Society of Camden County College.

Shane Ward has been writing for many years, his first project was fan fiction and he can still be found writing stories for his favourite TV shows, but has now moved into telling personal stories and attempting to become a professional novelist.

Matthew Wilson is a UK resident who has written since an early age, recently these stories have escaped to the general public via magazines and ezines. He juggles two jobs and one novel into some kind of order while wishing there was 25 hours in the day.

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THE TOOLBOX

